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34

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The Other Lessons of Phaedrus

By D. G. Grace

Art by Jon Foster

I am completely insane.

I clearly remember thinking that as I sat testing the fit of my v-suit: fingers, balls of feet, butt cheeks. When I'd settled into the seat, straps — metal mesh straps, no less — had snaked out to wrap and buckle me. What's more, the buckles had been redesigned to be slightly difficult to undo. It was just crazy. They always strap in the opies; they never strap in the directors. Hey, you don't have to be insane to be a director, just to be an opie, right? After five Barnard-e years of directing I'd gotten out alive and with my sanity, and yet here I was again, snugging up a v-helmet, hooking on a kinesthesia collar, tapping my right earlobe to bring up the time readout.

"71/3/5 — 11:00:32.77" read the numbers in the upper right corner of my vision. I verified the date and time against my console clock. After the usual two seconds, the readout numbers winked out.

"Bridge to director," said a female voice in my left ear. "The opie is prepared for contact and injection. We'll be ready for shoot-through at 0300 hours. The captain recommends you take your time."

"Aye, Bridge," I returned. "Understand I am to be ready for othertransit at 0300 hours. Out."

"Okay, Charlie," I called to the AI, "let's see our pilot."

The image of a small woman wearing a v-suit and helmet and strapped into a chair appeared on my visor. She smiled calmly and squinted her eyes studiously, but that was just the tropes. I'm sure she was considering nothing more complex than, *Is that my reflection on the screen?*

"Open conference," I said. A bell tone answered, and I asked, "Well, Janet, are you ready to come out? We're all set to inject."

"Mmmm. Okay. Thanks, Jack," she said. Troped opies are always like that. Excuse me, ma'am, but I'm going to screw up your dopamine and acetylcholine levels again, okay? I guess I'd agree, too, if it meant feeling again.

"Shoot her up, Charlie," I called and then, after feeling a tiny sympathy pain in my ankle (horrid place to inject): "Blind conference." The bell answered again, and I spoke with the AI. "Give her one hour, Charlie, and then start the questioning. I'm going to nap a bit. Feeling kind of tired."

"I will wake you up at 1202 hours, Mr. McClintock," said Charlie.

"Thanks. Skipper gave us sixteen hours to estab-

lish a plot. Run the questions by slowly; no need to push her. Her primary delusion has something to do with all men being her father. She was raped by Daddy as a child. Last time I worked with her, Janet believed all other women were uncontrollably drawn to Daddy. Verify all this. We don't have bios for her last two trips. Let me know if anything's changed."

"Yes, sir," was all Charlie had to say. No curiosity, no surprise over the lost records. Typical AI. Of course, that's why AIs can't pilot otherspace — they're too linear. A damn fast AI, reading inputs from magnetic and gravitic scanners, can keep the ship from cracking on an othershoal, but when an uncensored, heuristically programmed mind sees that the number three thruster makes the ship go backwards, it expects that to work every time. Not in otherspace.

I relaxed, watched Janet, and let myself drift toward sleep. She just lay there, peacefully conversing with Charlie, looking not the least bit like a mass murderer. They never do.

Five years since I'd done this, and it felt like yesterday. In that time I'd spent a year hopping around to some of the more interesting known worlds, settled down, invested my bonuses, and built a respectable mining company. Not much had changed. The new drugs were quicker. We used to wait five hours to begin questioning and plotting after popping an opie; now we could do it in an hour. They call it progress. I'll call it progress when they don't need the opies. Working with delusional schizophrenics is like juggling rattlesnakes: fascinating but not very bright.

I always knew something would go wrong.

Otherspace just isn't a comfortable place for a human traveler. An uncensored pilot enters otherspace and few visual clues (overlap, maybe; perspective, no) tell him how far away the goal gate is or when the ship will reach it. Now he has to take in the scan data from the AI and not hallucinate under the influence of all the pretty colors, not lose track when time randomly disappears or stretches, not lose sight of the gate as six-dimensional stones fly at him, not become flustered if a retro propels him forward or a magnetronic candle bends light or cancels gravity or just does nothing. If the pilot is



the typical white-toothed, high-GPA, napkin-in-the-lap Star Academy graduate, he has about a twenty-five-percent chance of cracking the ship on an othershoal and one chance in five of finishing the trip *sans* mind. Not the sort of news that boosts ticket sales.

Interstellar travel was dying at its inception, strangling in the umbilicus of otherspace, when Interstel introduced interface piloting: an opie riding a delusion, an AI supporting the delusion with sensory inputs via a virtual sensation suit, and a director controlling what the AI sends. A symbiotic relationship of the intellectual sort. The opie achieves (virtually) whatever goal he most desires; the director guides the metaphoric reality through which the opie pilots without ever directly encountering otherspace; the AI provides virtual views of otherspace and creates a buffer between opie and director to prevent psychotic projection. The ship gets through every time. Not a single ship was lost in thirty years, not a single crew harmed, not a single passenger endangered.

Enter Janet Coombs.

Janet Coombs — a director who had been selected to opie status after a schizophrenic episode (waste not, want not) — had somehow escaped her piloting chamber on board the IOS *Hart Crane* just before othershoal. The rescue ship boarding the *Hart Crane* a few days later found Janet huddled in a corner of a cargo bay, caked with dry blood. The thirty-seven crew members and one-hundred-eighty passengers were dead of a creative combination of poisoning, asphyxiation, and stab wounds.

"We were very upset," Mr. Lawson of Interstel assured me. Lars Lawson was fat and bald and had sweaty lips. "We fully intend to turn Janet over to the authorities, break this story to the media, and pay double insurance to all the deceased passengers and crew."

"Once our current crisis is past, of course," said the woman in the ugly brown suit (cubist holographic epaulets, if you can believe that).

I leaned back in my desk and asked my bar for a scotch-and-soda. A good host would have offered drinks to his guests, but these two weren't bringing out my hospitable side. I'd been asleep on the sofa when they rang the bell. I'm always a bit grumpy when I wake up; besides, I'd twisted my ankle hurrying to answer the door. "Crisis?" I asked, testing my drink.

"Your vanadium shipment to Adler-Messmer, Mr. McClintock," said the fat man. "That vanadium shipment is absolutely vital —"

"To both our pocketbooks," I interrupted. I had no desire to hear his rationalizations. "Which, I suppose, is why you sent Janet Coombs up on a second flight. Considering the first incident, wasn't that rather moronic?"

Lawson's voice cracked and his lip quivered as he said, "She was the only otherpilot available. We're not scheduled to see another opie in here for a month. We took precautions. The IOS *Annabelle Lee* carried a minimum crew and no passengers, and we put an armed guard on the pilot chamber."

"But," I asked, "did the crew know about the *Hart Crane*?"

Lawson sighed, and I didn't need to hear the rest.

The woman in the ugly suit broke in before I could finish formulating his thoughts. "The guard was warned that she could be dangerous and not to trust the tropes. Honestly, McClintock, we don't *know* what happened on either trip. She disabled and erased the piloting AI's memory."

"So even the director wasn't informed?"

Fatboy shook his head.

"You can't say you weren't warned," I said. "I've told Interstel repeatedly not to use people like Janet. A mind that goes from eighty-plus points above the New Albany Regents norm to seventy-five below can't be trusted."

Uglysuit forced out a gravelly sigh.

"So, what's the plan now?" I asked.

"We send her up again," said the woman.

"What a fascinating mind you have. Ever consider a career in otherpiloting?"

The woman stood and crossed her arms. "This time we *will* inform the director. We intend to provide him with a set of backup security systems to protect the ship from Ms. Coombs."

"We also plan to use the best director available," Lawson announced with a pleased smile.

I drank down the last of my scotch.

"Unfortunately," Ms. Uglysuit grumbled, "Carter and Tyson were the two best working directors on Barnard-c. None of the three remaining choices has any real experience, and all of them have fairly low test scores."

"No one you'd want to trust with dear little Janet," I ventured.

"According to our records," said the woman, referring to the screen on her wrist, "you retired from Interstel five years ago and then spent a year hopping around to some of the more interesting known worlds, settled down, invested your bonuses, and built this little mining company. Still, you retired very early and with a final test score of ninety-six sagans above the NAR. That's even better than Tyson's."

"Whoa, Sweetheart, I'm retired, remember? I quit working with opies five years ago. Crazy people make my skin crawl. I'm no longer a director. Remember me? I'm a customer. I own the richest vanadium operation in this arm of the galaxy. I'm cheerfully groundbound, and I never need to do any real work ever again. Or, to put it more simply and directly: no."

"Look, McClintock," said Ms. Uglysuit, "this is an extremely important operation, partly because of the vanadium, yes, but also because of the nature of this problem. Think about it, McClintock: this is the first time this has ever happened. Hell, we don't even know what happened. This sort of thing could do irreparable damage to interface otherpiloting, and that could stall all interstellar travel for God-knows-how-long. So don't just sit there with that sarcastic half-smile, being glib and witty. We need you; what do you need?"

Lawson smiled a rather sickly little smile and nodded a weak little nod. Yes, *Mr. McClintock*, you may squeeze my testicles now if you'd like. Please, don't squeeze too hard.

Look, up in the sky: It's a need! It's a want! No, it's greedy-man! A thirty-five-year contract later (exempting McClintock Mining from tariffs and guaranteeing a forty-percent discount on all interstellar shipping), I was napping in a director's chair and waiting for 1202 hours.

The director's chamber had been Janet-proofed. My little meter-wide, half-wrap control panel had an excruciatingly simple set of controls: the buttons to set my clock, an emergency injection switch to trop the opie if necessary, and communications with the bridge. Other controls had been disabled, moved, or removed. Even the mess access controls were gone — the computer was programmed to deliver preselected meals. The release switch for Janet's restraints had been moved to the back wall of the chamber. To let her up from the chair, I had to unlatch myself from my chair (the buckles looked like some sort of crazy Chinese puzzle), walk around behind the chair, and turn a dial counter-clockwise. No one on the ship could release the pilot without turning that knob. Even the ship's computers couldn't access that lock.

Lawson and Ms. Uglysuit had categorically refused to inform the crew (my contract had a clause canceling our agreement if I informed them). They had, however, slightly modified the guard arrangement. This time, the piloting chamber had two armed guards, with instructions to burn Janet Coombs to vapor if she left the chamber before our arrival in orbit around Calvin. Absolutely no one (not me, not the captain, not anyone aboard) had authorization to override the guards' instructions.

At 1202 hours, Charlie came through with my wake-up call. The preliminary questioning had gone smoothly. Charlie confirmed that Janet was still fixated on her father, was resentful of men in sexual contexts, and believed in interstellar cartels that controlled all aspects of human nature. Our best possible constructs seemed to revolve around sexual situations involving her father. She wanted more than anything to hear Daddy admit that the only woman he ever really wanted was little Janet.

The virtual reality I settled on would have Janet being assigned by a secret organization to question Daddy. She would be disguised as a prostitute, would seduce Daddy, would handcuff Daddy to a bedpost, and would force him to admit that he had been compelled to copulate with other women by the members of a satanic cult. Once the first admission had come out, she would have to get him to admit that the only female he ever really loved was his daughter. She would then reveal her identity to him, and he would beg her to take his life.

The tale would be entirely virtual until we cut into otherspace. Janet snapping the handcuffs on Daddy would provide the motion analogue to drive us into otherspace. From then on, Charlie would alter Janet's visuals so that the goal gate looked just like Daddy. This should be a pretty tame ride, as such things went. Any othershoals would be seen by Janet as obstacles between her and Daddy — furniture, other people coming into the room. A violent magnetic storm might be seen as an interruption by members of the satanic cult — Janet, of course, would be prepared for such eventualities (firing her concealed pistol would light the ship's candles). Daddy's first admission would be Charlie's signal that we had gone outside normal space. The second admission — that Janet was the only one — would be the AI's flag that we'd reached the goal gate. Daddy's death — the knife being driven into his chest — would provide the exit from otherspace.

Any complications arising along the otherspace route would require some ad-libbing in the plot. Mostly, this was Janet's job, but it always helps to have someone there to kibbitz. This was my job. I would be invisible, capable of only minor physical manipulations (like, say, making a weapon just a little closer at hand to allow her to defend herself if a cultist showed up — the analog to which might be suggesting an aft starboard thruster). We would be relying primarily on Janet's overwhelming need to pry those words from Daddy and kill him in *just that way* as the impetus to get three hundred metric tons of vanadium through otherspace.

Pretty typical stuff really — nauseating, but typical. That made me suspicious. Janet Coombs was anything but typical. Suspecting an opie of ulterior motives at every turn is paranoid, but paranolacs live longer. As Socrates more or less tried to tell young Phaedrus, schizophrenia is not stupidity.

"Give me Janet on visual, Charlie, but keep me on blind."

The image of Janet Coombs came up on my visor. She was just sitting there, apparently absorbed with the task of walking two fingers across her body — a little headless man walking over two round hills. She looked up, looked right at me, and grinned. Then she blew me a kiss.

"Am I on blind, Charlie?" I asked, momentarily

panicked.

"Yes, sir," Charlie answered. "As per your instructions."

Clever, Janet, I thought. You must have calculated that I would be watching by now. Somehow, I was less suspicious now. If she thought she was in a position to frighten me, she must have believed she was in control.

"Okay, Charlie," I said once my heart rate was near normal again, "standard opening: wake her from this crazy daydream."

I tapped on my readout: 1625 hours. Good, we'd only wasted a little over five hours on the questioning and plot construction. We still had eleven hours to set up the virtual sequence to get Janet in the room with Daddy.

Suddenly I was standing in a room with a large bed and a mirrored ceiling. I glanced around, but Janet was not there.

What gives? I should have been seeing Janet come out of a daydream on the patio of a downtown cafe. That was the scenario.

The door opened, and in walked Janet. She was dressed in a skimpy, black silk babydoll, and she was leading someone by the wrist.

"Come on now, Sweetie," Janet said to the man coming through the door, "I won't bite. That costs extra."

I tapped up my time: 1627. "What the fuck's going on here, Charlie? Why are we in the brothel already?"

"Sequence proceeding according to plot," said Charlie.

"Bullshit!" I hissed. "We were supposed to start in the goddamned cafe! She has to receive her instructions."

"She has her instructions," said Charlie.

"What?" was all I could think to ask. Then I saw the face of Janet's customer. It was me. *Oh shit.*

"Let me help you out of those tight trousers, Jack," she said, kneeling before the other me. How did I get in this construct? I wasn't one of the proposed players.

I felt something at my waist, looked down to see Janet pulling down my pants. *Perspective shift.*

"Charlie, get me the fuck out of here!" I shouted.

"So soon, Jack?" she asked, looking up at me with huge blue eyes. Her hand slid up my thigh. "Don't you want to be my Daddy, Jack?" Her other hand came up with a scalpel glinting in it.

"Break, Charlie," I said as calmly as I could. I had to be in control, panicking would surrender control of this reality to the opie. *There is no knife. You're wearing a v-suit. Remove me from this sequence. Break, you piece of shit.*

My stomach lurched as I realized that Janet was above me, that I was looking up into her eyes, that she was framed in blue sky, and that a wind was

rushing past my ears. Another perspective shift.

The rock under my right hand snapped off just as Janet released my left wrist. I fell away from the cliff wall as she called, "Good-bye, Jack! It doesn't have to be like this!"

I clutched the rope with my gloved left hand. My body slammed against the wall, and pain exploded from my ribs. The rock wall slid by in a gray blur, the rope burning through the leather of my left glove, the rocks tearing at my right fingertips as I clutched for a hold. An undercut in the cliff wall yanked the stone surface out of my reach. With a painful *twang* that bent my back the wrong way, I reached the end of my rope. My harness blew all the air from my lungs, and the pain in my ribs crescendoed.

I had stopped falling just a few feet above a safe ledge, but my harness was crushing me, and — dangling in the undercut — I could no longer reach the cliff. Between the pain and the pressure there was no room to draw a breath. My vision blurred, and I blew saliva out of my nose. My hands scratched for the buckles of my harness, and that's when I froze.

"Fuck you, Janet," I hissed. I tapped up my time: 1635. "Break, Charlie. I'm not leaving this chair. Get me out of this sequence."

The lights went out and the air became cold and damp enough to prick up goosebumps on my arms. I was standing upright. A spot of light from a flashlight in my left hand crawled along the slimy walls of a corridor and picked her out of the gloom. She was hanging, manacled, spread-engled against the wall — naked. I had to admit, Janet Coombs was quite lovely. She had long, voluminous blonde hair, a fluid shape, and peachy skin: a decidedly pleasant virtual image.

"Save me, Jack," she whined, tears running down her cheeks. "I'll be back any minute now."

"Give me credit for some intelligence, Sweetheart, the big head can out-think the little one."

She screamed and something struck me solidly across the side of my face. The blow tossed me into a pile of something rotten, wet, and full of brittle bones. The flashlight landed near my foot. The shout I used to hold my spinning head in place came away bloody. My face was beginning to sting below my right eye. Whatever hit me had apparently raked my cheek.

Janet screamed again, and the whatever grabbed me. A breath full of warm, rancid meat flowed over the left side of my head, and several arms, tentacles, and claws swarmed around my torso. The talons started to sink slowly into my chest and abdomen. Pain blossomed from my abdomen, and blood ran down over my crotch and thighs. I could feel something like a scream rising into the back of my throat

as my hands involuntarily scrabbled for the steely claws.

Then I remembered the lesson of Phaedrus, and I tapped up the time: 1641.

I whistled. "Pretty impressive, Janet. I think I had a nightmare like this once. Charlie, break, you electromechanical son-of-a-bitch. Turn off my v-suit."

I woke with a start. I was sitting on a blue, leathery log at the forest's edge, looking into a red sun high in the orange sky. In the distance some house-sized, three-legged frogs with sonar loops atop their heads leapt alongside a sparkling purple river. I knew the view all too well. Adrenalin flooded my system: Miller's World.

I glanced around quickly: no predators nearby. The only sound I could hear was that of my own breathing within the ecosuit.

Echoes in the ecosuit, I thought. Nice sensory touch, and a v-suit does feel a bit like an ecosuit. I could almost believe I'm actually there — if I were a complete imbecile.

I was about to tell Charlie which part of my anatomy to kiss when a crystalline insect-thing with six wings and no legs landed on my knee. Immediately, it drove what felt like a two-inch stainless steel proboscis into my leg an inch above the patella. My back was yanked taut as something cold and screaming charged up the veins of my leg and all up my spine. My vision tunneled on the insect, and panic roared in my ears. I grabbed the bug and tried to pull it off. Another landed right next to it, and the pain doubled. I couldn't get a grip on either one of them; they were too slippery, and their snouts were buried too deep. I fumbled with them, wondering how I would repair the suit in time to avoid atmospheric poisoning. One of them snapped off at the proboscis, and the pain lessened. I broke off the other one, and the pain stopped.

The colors and bright sunlight were gone, replaced on all sides by blue-grey plastic and white shipboard lighting plates. I sat in my director's chair holding a broken plastic stem in each hand. I had snapped off two of the toggle switches from my console. One was the control that would have allowed me to trope Janet. The other was the hailing switch for the ship's intercom.

How the hell had she known where those switches were? For that matter, how had she found out about my trip to Miller's World? Was she in contact with the ship's computer? Did I have any secrets intact?

My readout tapped up at 1653.

The console before me burst into flames.

"Come on, Charlie," I said, still trying to sound as calm as possible, "break for Daddy. I know this is virtual. It's too coincidental."

"Collision imminent!" called the voice of the skipper over the PA. "Collision imminent!" A siren

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waited.

"Emergency planetfall!" called the flustered female voice of the OOD. "All hands prepare for emergency ocean landing. All hands prepare for emergency ocean landing."

I could feel the whole ship moving around me as the flames licked at my feet.

I pulled off my helmet and threw it on the deck. Then I tapped up the time at 1702.

"You may as well cut this plot, Janet!" I shouted over the siren's wail. "I can see the time readout. I know I'm still wearing the helmet. I *know* this is a sequence!"

My shins began to burn, and I screamed in spite of my knowledge. Pain picked at my skin, and I started to sweat. The air was filled with the acrid odor of burning insulation and the sweeter smell of burning meat.

It's not happening. It's a dream, a computer construct, I thought as I ripped away my kinesthesia collar.

The ship's damage control computer kicked on the extinguishers in my chamber. The flames died in a fog of halogens, but I could still feel the burning in my legs. My skin charred away below the knees. Tears bled from my eyes.

The room grew hot and smelly. The stench of smoke battled with the rubbery-chemical smell of the halogen extinguishing agent and with the pungency of my own body odor. Sweat ran down my sides and prickled on my forehead. My head spun in a damn good simulation of shock. I could barely see through the sweat and tears.

"1708," said my readout. I was pretty sure the readout required the helmet. (Didn't it?)

The chamber spun hard about in a nauseating spiral. (Hadden't I removed the kinesthesia collar?)

"Collision in thirty seconds," said the captain.

The spiral grew faster, and my head and stomach started counter-spinning.

"Collision in five seconds," said the captain.

The entire universe slammed to the left with a neck-wrenching jolt. I hung in my chair in a chamber that was apparently sideways. The chamber rocked and surged like a ship on a rough sea. The main lights went out; battery-powered emergency lights came on. The PA system crackled and went silent. A bulkhead groaned and then ripped open. Screaming and hissing, a column of water punched through to the opposite bulkhead. The chamber began filling with salty-smelling water.

I tapped up 1711.

"I'm not going to undo the straps, Janet," I said with what volume I could manage, trying to shout over the roar of water.

"You will die, then," Charlie's voice said inside my head, cutting through the roar. "Even if your assumption that this is a virtual construct turns out

to be correct, you will drown. Your body will react to the virtual fluid as it would to water."

"Whose side are you on, Asshole?" No one answered, but I wasn't sure the voice in my head had really been Charlie's.

The water was less than a meter below my head, now. I could just reach it with my left hand.

"I probably won't enjoy drowning," I said, not bothering to shout over the roar. "Janet should get a kick out of it though, eh, Charlie? Too bad mine will be the only death she can claim this time."

The water pushed up against my left side. God it was cold. I hadn't expected it to be cold. It sucked the heat out of my body, numbed my side. I completely forgot the pain in my ankles as the cold water expelled the air from my rapidly shrinking lungs and my muscles began to shake and cramp.

I deliberately turned my head into the water.

It's not there, I told myself. *You're looking to the left and you're about to take a deep breath of air.*

I inhaled hard. The cold water scratched at my lungs. I coughed and retched. I breathed again, and the same thing happened. Ice-cold needles pierced my head and razor blades slashed at my bronchial tubes. Panicked, I turned my head to get the "air" that had been to my right. There was no longer air there, either; the in-flooding water had completely enveloped me. Just a faint glimmer from one of the emergency lights winked at me through the water now; I couldn't see anything else.

I tapped up the time: 1714.

I sat perfectly straight in my chair and ignored the salt stinging my eyes.

You're not drowning, I thought. I took another cold breath and felt nothing but cold pain. It was like breathing in a vacuum. I was drowning.

The faint glimmer of the one remaining emergency light went black. Everything went black.

Hell was quiet, cold, and black.

A thousand years later, something like warm pain happened in my chest. It coursed through the appropriate veins and pressed on my head. A narrow bar of light snuck through my eyelids.

I breathed.

I coughed, and light flooded my sight. My skull sparkled with tiny muscle aches. A young man in a white uniform pulled back out of my vision.

"He's coming around now," said the white blur to two dark blurs behind him.

The things closest to me came into focus. I was still strapped into my chair. My helmet and collar had been removed and placed on the console.

"Let's get you out of that," said the white blur, reaching for my buckles.

At the thought of the buckles fear took control of my arms, and I grabbed his hands.

"It's okay, McClintock," said Ms. Uglysuit, leaning her epaulets into my range of vision. "It's over."

The other, fatter blur was Lars Lawson.

"What are you two doing aboard this crate?" I asked. "Did we abort?"

Lawson cleared his throat. "Uh, this isn't an othership, Mr. McClintock. We had to keep you in the dark. If you'd known, Janet would have discovered the truth."

"This is an interface simulator at the Barnard-c Interstel Training Center," said the plain woman. "We had to find out how Janet Coombs was getting through to her directors. You see, we knew she had to be doing just that. Tyson had the same controls over her chamber as you, but she still got loose. We had to know how she did it."

"You set me up," I said, thinking about my contract.

The orderly or doctor or whatever started trying to undo my buckles again. He was having some trouble figuring them out, so I helped.

"We, of course, will live up to the terms of your contract," Lawson explained, showing more perception than I'd have credited him with.

The last buckle undone, the straps retracted into my seat.

The doctor/nurse/orderly/guy helped me to my feet. Lawson gave me an arm to lean on and Ms. Uglysuit led us out of the chamber into a white and blue tiled corridor.

"You helped us find the key, McClintock," said the woman, opening a wooden door at the end of the corridor. "When Charlie spoke to you, we knew that she'd gotten through to him. We didn't know it was possible, but Janet Coombs' illness is so pervasive that — apparently — she can project her delusions into an artificial intelligence. With Janet's coaxing, Charlie lost track of who was directing and who was piloting."

We entered a plush conference room, furnished with leather-upholstered chairs and an ornate conference table. Lawson closed the old-fashioned wooden door behind us and led me to a seat.

"Thank you, Mr. McClintock," Lawson said, trying to sound sincere, "you've done us an incredible favor. I'm sorry you had to go through such pain for this."

On the table was a new version of my contract, explaining that the previous contract was hereby nullified but that I would be entitled to receipt of all benefits laid out therein. Lawson had already signed.

"Any questions, McClintock?" Uglysuit asked, handing me a pen.

"Just a couple. For one, what happened to Janet Coombs?"

"She's been troped and returned to her ward," Lawson said.

"And how do you expect to prevent this in the future?"

"We're not sure, yet," Ms. Uglysuit admitted, pulling a chair up beside me. "Backup Als? Backup directors? It will be up to the R&D people to decide. We still need to sort through all her conversations to see exactly how she counter-programmed Charlie."

I signed the paper and stood, handing back her pen.

"And now," I added, "I'd like to get a shower and a change of clothes."

"Right this way," Lawson beamed, making an "after you" gesture toward the door. I reached out and grabbed the ornate knob and turned it: clockwise did nothing; counter-clockwise made a click. The door opened on a small, empty closet.

My heart raced. I turned around slowly. The room was empty. I was alone.

God help me. I turned it counter-clockwise.

I tapped my earlobe. The time was 1844.

I reached up very slowly and pressed firmly on both sides of my head. Then I lifted off the helmet.

I was standing in the chamber, behind the director's chair, facing the control knob that had released Janet from her restraints.

I tapped my earlobe, and nothing happened. Did that mean I really *had* removed the helmet, this time? Or were they playing with me? Maybe Charlie was feeding me false data. Maybe I hadn't reached my earlobe with my finger. Maybe I would never escape Janet's virtual delusions. My ninety-six sagan mind just couldn't be sure.

The console clock read 2312. Assuming both clocks were still synched, it had taken me over *four* hours to get that helmet off. A heavy soreness in my arms seemed to bear this out.

I opened the door to my chamber and found the words "HI DADDY" scrawled in blood on the blue corridor wall. I ran down the passageway and found the two guards lying haphazardly in a curve. Their faces were blue, and their weapons were gone. Thumb-sized scraps of silver cloth from a v-suit were scattered in a meandering trail down the corridor. Apparently she'd found a knife or scissors; v-suit mesh won't tear.

Janet's voice, purring like a Persian cat's, rolled from the PA: "Charlie convinced the ship's life-support computer to cut off the air to that corridor for a few minutes to kill some stray vermin. Wasn't that sweet of him, Daddy?"

I followed the cloth trail to the bridge expecting to find more bodies around each corner. Fortunately, I saw none. The door to the bridge dilated open before me; either I was no real threat or the party was in my honor. I expected the bridge to be a charnel house: blood and bodies and the smell of putrefaction. I was stunned to find it clean and clear. Lonely console lights glowed silently, and blips rode across oblivious screens. She'd disposed

of an entire crew, singlehandedly, in just four hours.

Janet was standing at the OOD's post. Only the sleeves and back of her v-suit remained. She held a pistol in her right hand, trained on me.

"I'm the last, then?" I said as calmly as possible. I tried to smile.

She nodded and started toward me, her left hand concealed behind her hip. I had a pretty good idea what was in her left hand.

Suddenly I saw the way out. Not stupid, Phaedrus, but still insane. Just as she came within reach I said, "I had to do it, Janet. They made me do it."

Her eyes narrowed and she leaned forward a bit to examine my face more carefully.

"Yes, Janet," I whispered, hoping — *please, God* — she wouldn't be certain of my voice, "it's me."

She came closer. I placed my hands gently on her sides just under her arms. She moved even closer, and my hands slid through, around to her back, down to her hips; she was awash with gooseflesh. She pressed her breasts against my shortribs and leaned her head on my collarbone.

"I only wanted you, Janet. You were the only one. I'm sorry. I know you'll never forgive me, but you're the only one I ever really wanted. You're the only one I ever loved."

"Oh, Daddy," she sighed. "It's all right, now. It's all over." She inhaled. "Now!" Her left arm bunched and thrust forward. I was ready. I caught her left wrist with my right hand and turned the blade in on Janet. It slid between a pair of ribs, and she gasped.

She looked into my eyes and said, "Daddy?"

Then she gurgled, dropped the gun, fell limp.

The lights went out for a moment, and then came back up. A bell chimed.

"And we're through!" called the voice of Janet Coombs. Her image came up on my visor, she was seated before a half-wrap console, smiling and flipping switches. "Director to Bridge, other-transit complete to Adler-Messmer. She's all yours, Skipper. Other-maneuvering, out."

She smiled into the screen. "Hell of a ride, eh, Jack? Looked pretty good at the start, though. When you had me chained to that wall, I figured we were almost through. Then that damned grav storm hit us. God, we must have been wall-to-wall storms and stones on this one. I thought you'd never pop those buckles. Must've been some interference between us and the gate still. Hell, I didn't even know you'd unstrapped until you turned the lock and the forward thrusters fired. Glad we didn't have to contend with any vector shifts. But, hey, don't worry about that othershoal. Nothing anyone could've done about it — it broadsided us. No severe damage done."

She combed the helmet mats from her hair with her fingers. "See if you can't think of someone else

to murder next time, though, okay, Jack? It's enough to give a girl a complex."

"I'm not buying this crap, Janet," I said. I don't know why she was on that side of the screen, how she'd deluded not only the AI, but the crew. Maybe more time had passed than I thought. Maybe this was another ship. I made one more attempt, calmly: "Charlie, you're taking orders from the wrong side. I'm Jack McClintock, the director. She's switched chairs, somehow, switched stations, but I'm the director. Check your records. It has to be there."

She just sighed and shook her head. "I'll never learn. Sorry, Jack, but I'm going to have to put you away for a bit," she said, flipping another switch. I felt the painful surge of chemicals into my ankle. The drugs would be bringing me down in a moment.

"That's okay, Janet," I said, "I'll return the favor. Someday. You can't keep up this charade for long. You fell before; you'll fall again. Besides, how do you expect to explain this to Lawson and his partner?"

She didn't laugh at me, but the desire was lurking just behind her eyes. I think that's why she looked away so suddenly. Her smugness beamed through the screen, through that phony sorrowful furrow in her brow. Then tears seemed to well into her eyelids. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe she was just scared. Maybe this game was harder than she'd originally thought. She'd either underestimated me or overestimated herself.

Still, I had to mentally commend Janet's creativity: focused psychotic projection into an AI, how clever. If it worked for her in her warped state, it would work for me. As she proceeded through her post-othershot checks, once more ignoring her incapacitated opie, I smiled a (probably) soporific smile and winked a small wink.

"Too late this time," Charlie whispered. "We'll get her next time. Sleep now, sweet Phaedrus."

Janet looked up sharply. "Did you say something, Charlie?"

"No, Lieutenant. The ship's computer notes having just fired a set of retro jets. I would speculate that you mistook the hullborn vibrations for my voice."

"Roger," Janet muttered distractedly as she continued her checks. A slow chuckle quaked my lungs. I wanted to drift away with no expression, but the tropes dampened my self-control: a smile pushed at my cheeks.

"It's not over, Janet," I heard my voice croak over the soft chuckle.

Clever little Janet. Now, even as the chemicals rushed to balance the electrochemical reactions in my brain, I felt a rush of excitement, a little epinephrine to momentarily counter the tropes. Oh, won't she be surprised when she sees just how clever she really is? □

Beyond Thunderdome



As the daylight terminator takes its course around the Earth each day, bringing both darkness and the evening news to the inhabitants, it provides an occasion for humanity, or at least that portion that owns sets, to sit down in front of their televisions and watch Bosnia. The daily broadcasts have assumed the character of a long-running sports event, as each day television reporters stand among the exploding artillery shells and sniper fire to summarize the day's plays, recount the standings, and describe the atrocities.

Unfortunately, nobody outside Bosnia understands the scoring. Regardless of whether they know who is winning, most of humanity feels compelled to watch, fascinated by a community engaged in flaying itself of the epidermis known as civilization, trying to work its way down to the raw flesh of barbarity.

Bosnians who were once neighbors now practice their marksmanship on each other, at least when they cannot find an artillery piece. The rest of humanity monitors the proceedings on CNN and congratulates itself for not having been born there.

Most of the debate about Bosnia, both outside and inside the region itself, centers on who should be blamed for it. If the blame can be properly assigned, then everyone outside Bosnia can feel secure, unless they live in the Sudan or Somalia, that is.

Human beings like to believe they can create a community that will not inevitably try to remake itself as a theme park based on the Mad Max movies. It is a sort of

hope that is based more on the fears of what it might do to tourism than anything else. But their hope is misplaced. There are two kinds of human communities: those that have turned into Thunderdome and those that will.

After Bosnia, where is the next Thunderdome? Parts of the old Soviet Union look like promising sites, and Africa seems to grow them like mushrooms. The United States, however, is determined to avoid anything like this and to prevent it has begun arming itself. In this country, between 1981 and 1989, the sale of firearms increased by 34 percent. In a decade of unstable economic forces, it's possible people acquired these guns as work tools, but, in fact, robbery is on the decline in the United States. In the nine years between 1981 and 1990, the number of robberies per 100,000 of population dropped by 0.7. In the same period, the number of all crimes (again, incidents per 100,000 of population) dropped by 0.6.

Many Americans like to complain about crime and insist their politicians do something about it, so nobody makes very much of the decline in crime over the past decade. Not to worry, though. One kind of crime is very much on the increase. Violent crime has increased by 23.1 crimes per 100,000 of population. Most of the increase was in the area of aggravated assault, although rape is moving up as well.

The murder rate was nearly the same in 1990 as it was in 1981, although the 1980s were a particularly peaceful time in the United States. From 1980 to 1985, the incidence of murder declined

steadily. It started up again after 1985, and from 1987 to 1990, murder grew in the United States five times faster than the population, by 2,082 cases.

During those three years, cuttings and stabbings, poisonings, drownings, strangulations, asphyxiations, and shootings by rifle continued to decline. Murder by hand (or foot) was down as well. These kinds of murders were never particularly common anyway. Americans are a naturally gentle people, and if they actually have to grapple with a person to murder him, they would rather not do it.

In the same three years, there were modest increases in murder by explosives, blunt objects, fire, narcotics, and shotgun. These kinds of murders are by and large a little messier than the other types, but some of them are so efficient that they are really difficult to resist.

But if you care about convenience and portability when you commit a murder, nothing beats a handgun. Altogether, handguns accounted for 2,076 of the 2,082-case increase in murder over those three years — 99.8 percent. So not only are Americans arming themselves, but they're getting in some practice with the firearms.

Just let somebody try to start up a situation like Bosnia in the United States. They won't get very far. This, you see, was where the Bosnians made their mistake — not enough firepower. □

From the Beach

By Derek Godat

Art by Peggy Ranson

The day was nearing dark when Mort took his brother out to meet the aliens. They took his Fish across, cutting a line of broken water from the bay head-on into a dirty orange sunset. Bits of wind came at them, and near silence in between. It was warm out there, and lifeless.

Nicholas regarded the sky at his feet; broken lumps of cloud aglow with sunlight, dirty and gray-ing at the touch of nightfall. On the ocean's mirror, lights swam up to his toes. The black crucifix of a plane blew overhead, Nicholas's eyes rolling up into his skull to capture the image.

"Like a big bird."

Behind him, Mort was the tower of weathered denim and tan. In three days, Nicholas had never seen his brother wear anything more.

Then an arm was waving out across the sky, and Nicholas's eyes followed a finger's path.

"That's the place. Those lights, there ..."

Nicholas saw nothing; then, squinting, maybe a pinpoint of light on the edge of the world.

"You said their names are Toto and something ..."

"Togo and Jones." Mort corrected him. "And Bean. You saw Bean."

Nicholas grimaced with the memory, his mouth squishing into a flat line. "Yeah." He'd seen Bean. A far-off speck of a Chinaman collecting crushed aluminum along the beach. Not a hint of alien to him.

Silence. Nicholas studied mats of hair on his toes, the water rolling underneath, every wave the same. When he glanced up, the sun had gone.

"I'm surprised that you came along, Nick. Really."

His brother's voice had gone flat with far-off thought. Nicholas had heard this tone only a few times in his life. It chilled him.

"Not my style? Yeah, well, I'm surprised, too. But ..."

And then he said it, "But aliens ... I mean, shit, Mort. Aliens, from another planet." The voice fell out of his mouth. Silly. Thoughts were sloshing over the edges of his brain. Nicholas took a long drink of ocean air and closed his eyes to put things in order. The sky was cooling.

"I couldn't sit at home, let you go into space while I was watching TV or something. I mean, I've told you, Mort. I knew you were stoned that first night, knew it."

Behind Nicholas's shoulder, Mort snorted a laugh. He crouched, browned belly skin wrinkling

up above what had once been jeans. Nicholas studied his brother out of the edges of his eyes. The man looked like the end of an evolutionary process; a frame perfected from years of erosion by the tides, the sand, the sun burning on skin. And what if you set him loose in a real city, a thousand miles inland? Nicholas had no doubts that his brother would find water, and a filthy piece of sand to squat in.

Mort was hardly unique. Nicholas had witnessed whole crowds of bodies that looked as if they had spent their lives in the sea. Old men, even. He'd seen them perched on pier-tops, knobs of leather skin spaced like pilings; and rusted, string-wound poles extended from old arms.

Amphibians. That was the word for it.

This mild fear had emerged. At any moment, Nicholas feared that his brother might sprout fins and slide into the waves, with teeth hungry for tuna.

Nicholas went on with his story, half-distracted by his own fantasy. It didn't matter. He'd talked this talk before.

"But you called again. Three weeks. Now I knew you were straight, but crazy. Completely shit-crazy. You and Anna both were. Figured you'd finally fried your brains in this sun. I had to fly out here. Now, I'm not so sure ..."

And, again, Nicholas said it to himself, said it twice. He really did not believe it, his brother's aliens.

It had to be bullshit. Had to be.

Mort regarded him from behind a mop's-head of ragged hair, as if he could watch those thoughts tick and spin in Nicholas's head. Those bright eyes, his brother's eyes, sane and clear as ever, cut vertically with hair. Three years ago, Christmas, Nicholas had watched his brother wipe tangles out of his eyes every half-minute. Now, Mort didn't seem to mind. Straw-colored weeds poured down around his chin where, in the dim light, they seemed to fuse with unkempt patches of beard.

"You know I'm not shit-crazy, Nick. I wouldn't have called if I wasn't sure, absolutely sure about this. And you know, even if you can't see it yet, it's not bullshit."

Nicholas sensed another silence coming, and he squirmed, groped for conversation.

"Your man ... Bean? Bean didn't seem much of an



alien to me. You know. I don't have any idea what an alien's supposed to be. But it wasn't Bean."

Mort padded away, his bare feet soft slaps on the deck of the Sunfish. His voice came back, the edge of its solemnness dulling by inches.

"Bean's alien all right. But he doesn't show it. None of 'em do. They joked about it once. Said they'd gotten pissed and gone to these really shitty alien films. Said Jones had walked outside and started calling people 'humanoid mofucks.' Just what he called 'em. Almost got arrested."

In the dark, Nicholas shook his head and tried to swallow it all. Things were happening quickly.

"Yusuf was with them, then. You remember Yusuf? College man?" Beads of light were springing out across the body of the boat.

Yeah, he had a vague picture of Yusuf. Whitest teeth he'd ever seen, stuck into some wire-scratchy sweater. Other than that, the face was muddy, and dark with time.

"Law school or something? He going to the Other Planet?" Nicholas said it in an ominous way, a television announcer's voice. He wondered what the Other Planet was called.

"Yeah. Going to give up a law degree to surf out there."

Nicholas shook his head again.

"And these other friends of yours. Nick and ..."

"... and Schmeizer."

"Yeah. And Schmeizer. What have they got going with the aliens?"

The last of the lights illuminated Nicholas's feet. They looked dead, a sick blue under the glow.

"Surfing, man," Mort said, as if it were the best of all possible answers. As if it were a perfectly good reason to pack off to some Martian wilderness.

There were others. Mort's girl, Anna, she'd been the first one to contact the aliens. They were collecting bugs and things, so Mort said, to ship off to space. Bugs and things, that was Anna's specialty. Some old man Mort had talked about, he was going, too. Said the old man built the spaceship ...

Mort's tan and jeans reappeared, and sat, with legs dangled over the edge of the boat. His toes went watery-dead in the light. An arm offered Nicholas a pink pack of sticks.

"Gum, man?"

Nicholas unwrapped the pink and chewed. Silver of a foil blew out over the water, and snagged on a rail, reflecting the sea.

"Why're you coming, Nick? Really."

For a half-second, Nicholas stopped chewing. He worked the gum to the other side of his mouth, and remembered back to that morning. That Morning, black capitals in his head.

He'd gotten out of bed, same as any other day. Showered without a thought, his hands working the razor from rote. He'd put coffee on, slid his feet into

familiar suede. Then, knotting his tie, the red-dotted silk he wore every three weeks, Nicholas saw it. The face. In the mirror. His father's face. The old man, who'd disappeared to the same hidden office, five days out of the week, since before Nicholas could remember. Who'd sat Saturday and Sunday and watched the television, old pictures crackling for hours, mother cooking up familiar scents from the shine and tile and polished wood of the kitchen. And, then, the same old man who'd come in the door one winter night, and hung his hat and coat, and then had sat down on the bathroom carpet, looking very surprised and very tired, and looking as if he had something to say, but didn't have the breath for it. Nicholas's mother, scattering silverware across the kitchen ...

And then, his brother, grinning through the phone. Laughing about aliens. Three of them, and they're taking me away, would you like to come along?

Nicholas shrugged out of his thoughts. The nest of blonde hair was staring out to the farthest waves, his lips slightly parted. "I need to figure things out," was all Nicholas could say to his brother. Mort nodded.

And then he felt very old and tired, wishing Mort's aliens would do their business and he could sleep in some spongy green bed and know that it was true. Impossibly true.

The factory had been constructed from generations of rotting wood and irregular cuts of sheet metal, slicked over with a film of trash that the ocean's winds had stolen and plastered there. It sat on the outer edge of a fringe village, a jumble of houses built of tacks and abandoned plywood. The one-eyed king among a flock of the blind, it looked to Nicholas.

Mort was leading the way up some unmarked path, a treacherous spill of grit strewn with moonlit garbage. They'd tied the Fish at some sprawling docks done in the same style as shanty-town. And Mort had pointed at the factory on the hill, leaned in close, and said "Aliens. That's their shack." Said it dramatically, Nicholas thought.

Suitcases tugged at Nicholas's joints, threatening to stretch a millimeter too far. He hadn't packed enough for another planet, only what he'd brought on the plane. Mort had told him it was okay, not to worry.

"Jones says they don't have all this stuff." He'd thumbed around at the world. "But they've got enough you can live on."

Mort was bringing two of his personal treasures into outer space. The first was the finned slash of a surfboard, one unfamiliar to Nicholas. Mort had always broken down his designs every few months, fixed what wasn't moving, cut away what didn't

need to be. The old boards were stacked away in a spare bedroom, each with a membrane of dust and stories to tell.

The second thing was Mort's jeans, and he carried them up the hill on his ass.

Under a spill of yellow light, they found their way in. It had been a doorway at one time, Nicholas guessed, but someone had attacked it with crude tools. Two doors had been crammed into the widened space, hinged loosely with tangles of metal. Nicholas pushed his way into the hollow gloom, scales of dead dirty-white paint coming away on his suitcases. With one shoe he propped open a door, time enough for Mort and a surfboard to slip by. It took the thump of a suitcase to wedge the slab of wood shut again.

Inside, the murk had a tantalizing edge to it; so dark that Nicholas couldn't quite connect shadows with names, yet with light enough that he could make things out and wonder at them. Four times he stopped to marvel at some treasure that had cracked underfoot or caught his eye with its jagged silhouette. A rubber doll's face, its grin stretching as it squashed to his sole. Baubles on the spine of a mummified Christmas tree, draped with tinsel, spider's webs, and time. They told him nothing.

Someone had preserved a favorite dog, black-furred in the dark, with eyes like marbles. It was fixed in an odd position, sitting on its rump with a head slightly cocked, gazing past Nicholas. Out to sea, he thought.

It licked his wrist as he passed.

The saliva was still sticky when he found Mort. Found him in a well-lit room with a small crowd of faces. The chosen few, Nicholas guessed. Hand-picked for travel between worlds. And then he remembered the tug of his luggage and inside his head a voice reminding him, "Your ass is in this, too. You could've been at the airport two days ago, but you need to know ..."

Simultaneously, the realization that the aliens were in this room.

Nicholas heard his suitcases drop. And then he was looking into their eyes.

From somewhere, the room was going almost-gray with dawn. Nicholas could squint at features he hadn't noticed. Aquariums, mostly. Fish tanks. Bowls of things with wires and tubing spider-webbed between. Watching patiently, Nicholas could see something there, a bubble here, and, once, a flash of scales.

He'd been sitting for a long time, propped up against a washing machine, sunken into a cushion of dirty shirts. There was a beer between his legs. Nicholas remembered watching that beer for a long time, hours possibly. A thin shadow had started to grow around the bottom of the can.

From the Beach

He sat, thinking.

The aliens hadn't been anything. Anything unusual. Anything he'd expected. They were surfers and scavengers, mostly. Also scientists, though it wasn't the sort of science that Nicholas liked to think that aliens practice. With no direction or methods, they collected information from the beach.

When Bean had demonstrated their experiments with hermit crabs, Nicholas looked for anything that smacked of science and the laboratory: odd smells, balls of printout, wicked glints on curved tools. He found nothing. Bean had showed him how to hold a crab, stretching the skin of his palm so that the tiny claws bit nothing. The others had squatted around a derelict pinball machine, its legs twisted out from under, glass shattered and meticulously brushed away. Loosed in the forest of painted metal and bumpers, hermit crabs had delighted the aliens for nearly a half-hour. That was research: other-worldly science at work.

Nicholas had said that he worked with computers, and that he imagined alien technology must be centuries beyond anything he has experienced.

"Ah," Togo had grinned, "Computers." He'd recognized the word, and produced glossy photographs. Nicholas saw dim squares of Polaroids shot through a storefront window, the plastic block of a keyboard under lights. An old woman's eyes caught in the midst of her shopping. Togo smiled and pointed. "Computers."

There had been hours of talk. And, again, Nicholas had found his expectations dissected. The aliens chatted about Simon and Garfunkel, questioned the virtues of boxing. Jones and Bean argued over political moves they'd heard on the radio.

Out of curiosity, Nicholas interrupted and asked what sort of government the Other Planet had. The alien who'd named himself Togo had blinked and said, "Don't have any." Nicholas almost choked up beer. "We just do stuff," he shrugged, as if the concept were obvious enough.

And, then, there had been hours of coffee. Nicholas had sat with Anna and the kid who his brother called Nick and very gradually, they had talked about everything. The aliens were gone, asleep. In hammocks, they'd said. The others had slipped off, one by one, on some piece of decaying furniture. Mort had sprawled nearby, one arm touching his surfboard, the fingers curled in sleep.

"Pretty stupid, huh?"

Nicholas realized he'd been gone, with eyes open and staring at the empty coffee pot. The boy, Nick, was saying something.

"What?" There was gum between Nicholas's lips, as if he'd been drooling. He wondered if he had been.

"Pretty stupid. Two guys named Nick on the same planet. The Alien Planet, I mean. Pretty fucking weird, huh?" There was a slight smile under the

kid's nest of yellow hair. A frame that was bony and tanned, with old jeans tied on and forgotten. Nicholas wondered how long it would be before the kid grew patches of beard and hair to hide his face.

The smile widened. "Nothing. Go back to sleep, man." The boy wandered off into the house of salvaged scrap. Nicholas heard urine striking sand, the only sound.

He shook his head. It was very dark and the world had gone to sleep while he wasn't looking; bodies draped over places of dark, faces gone limp. Anna had twined herself in between Mort and his surfboard, but Nicholas couldn't remember her voice ever fading. With her little girl's lips, and legs slicked with moonlight, she brought pictures unbidden to his mind. Pictures of Marie. Marie, who'd been finding other places to sleep. Who he'd kissed once, with suitcases in his hands, the door open, a car waiting. He heard the television click on as he left. That was over.

"Find me a Martian woman," he heard himself murmur, lapsing back into sleep. "What's that?" The kid had returned with something caught between thumb and forefinger. A hermit crab, tiny feet clawing at air.

"Just thinking ..." Nicholas thought he'd said.

"Space? About space? Me, too ..." The boy was dunking his crab down into the drained coffee pot. "It's like Christmas, you know? Can't sleep ..." The claws squeaked on glass, smearing milky brown beads of coffee. Nicholas wasn't listening.

And then, suddenly, at that precise moment, a hand was shaking him and telling him to "get up, man. Get up." He told the hand to fuck off, and heard a woman's laugh.

"Gotta launch the ship soon, man."

That brought him up. Aliens he was thinking. He was in California and his brother's friends were all crazy and these three guys said that they were aliens and it was stupid. Really stupid. Like something he'd go for when he was a kid. Like fairies and Santa. And he could see his mother shaking her finger at his nose and hoping he'd learned his lesson. Once and for all.

And then he was awake and sniffing at something awful, like sweaty shirts.

Bean was standing in close, over him, and Anna and the other woman were standing further back. It was very bright, and Nicholas saw that wherever he had slept was filled to the ceiling with trash.

"Got a bathroom?" It was all he could think of.

"In back."

Nicholas crawled to his feet, arms aching, eyes slitted against the sunlight. He walked very carefully, his bladder threatening explosion, until a low-set toilet emerged from the maze of scrap. Just sitting there in the middle of the room, staring at him, but Nicholas was thinking what the hell ...

He was very lucky. Looking down, Nicholas saw that ugly gray fish were circling the bowl, above a plug of cement. Nicholas stood there for a full minute. This, he thought, was even more amazing than Mort's aliens. Then he pissed out a window.

The three were waiting for him on the hillside. It was bright outside, a white that poured into his eyes and burned something in the back of his head. The ground was dirty sand, and smothered with garbage. Nicholas felt grains sneaking into his shoes, in between his toes. He kicked a juice jug into the wind.

They were very black, two of them. The other was china white. The other called himself Bean. He looked vaguely Oriental, like a Burmese girl Nicholas had known. She had called it that, "vaguely Oriental."

"That's what people think of you when they see your eyes, your hair, hear you talking English. And when they ask you about Henzada, or Laos, or China, or wherever the hell they think you're from and you tell them 'hey, man, I've never even been there.' That's what they say—'She's vaguely Oriental.' Like it's a nationality on its own. Like those Japanese guys, those black guys who talk like they're white. You listening to me, man?"

Jones and Togo were a different story. Both straight black and starved-skinny. Like the aborigines Nicholas had seen in *National Geographic*. Inverted pictures of himself. They were gesturing to him now.

Jones crooked a black, black arm around Nicholas's shoulders, as if he had something important to say. They walked.

"I am very happy that you are coming with us. Not many would have the courage ..." His voice was older than his body, warm, every word smiling.

At that thought, Nicholas had to suppress a shiver. Something was not right, not alien enough ...

"I have to see for myself," Nicholas said, pulling away. "If it's real. I'm sorry. I can't believe you until I know ..."

Jones nodded once, a slight thing.

"I understand. It will be soon, now ... but, first, I ask that you help us with the launch. We can move faster with your hands."

From behind his back, Jones produced a pair of gloves. Silver and white, like spaceman's gloves. A question formed in Nicholas's throat. His feet shifted uneasily on the trash.

"Radiation?"

"Blackberries."

The shack city had grown on a sloping range of hills that sprawled down into the sea from some place cleaner. At the top of the tilt, a cliff wall of apartments, thousands of them, fused together; each done in white stucco and maroon, each with a rail-guarded balcony and tiny, colored ant-people.

Nicholas heard music. Too much of it. It was a tangible thing that hung in the blue, a thousand radio bands stirring the air, words melting into a garbage hiss.

He followed Bean's shoes: more salvage, it looked. The alien wore mismatched sneakers held together with electrical tape, and Bean's dead white feet peeked through in spots. That, Nicholas realized, was the first odd thing he'd seen.

"Bean," he ventured, hesitant. "Why doesn't your skin tan?"

Bean turned on his glued-on soles, his eyes thin and black. Nicholas saw that, beneath an army jacket, his chest was dead white, flesh stretched over ribs. "Cause I'm alien, man." And winked.

They picked blackberries to the mumble of radio and the static of the ocean winds. Nicholas was glad for the spaceman gloves, which kept his hands from the stick and tear of the berry bushes. When they had finished, his arms were trickling at a dozen thorn scratches. Nicholas peered at Bean's arms, hoping to glimpse green blood or acid jelly, but the alien had been more cautious.

He surveyed the spill of huts below, the rusted shell of a bus, a gray huddle of garbage cans, tiny figures swinging on a tire, out over the ocean ...

There, on a hill of dead weeds, some insects were struggling with the black blotch of a van. It looked like ... shit

They were going to push it into the waves. "Bean, look ..." He pointed the spot out. "Crazy." The alien grinned. "Our spaceship."

Nicholas realized that he hadn't heard a word. Jones and the old man were looking at him now, waiting for a nod, a grunt, a word that meant that he understood.

"I don't. I don't understand." He shook his head. "I don't get it." He didn't.

"Look, man," Mort started in, his voice gone grave. "I know you've got your doubts about this whole alien scam. I know we haven't shown you anything, anything that would make you be sure." With a hiss, he silenced Nicholas again. "But you've got to believe me this time. If you don't, then listen to Anna, or Yusuf. Christ, Nick, Yusuf's got five years of school and he's convinced."

He waved a hand toward where the aliens were loading their ship. The boy, Nick, was squatting in the dirt, nursing two pieces of a broken record, a smile on his face. "Oh, Lordy," Nicholas heard him say. "Dylan's fucked," he chirped, and slung the jags of vinyl out over the beach, scattering gulls.

"We've known these guys for weeks," Mort was saying, "and the old man, he's been building that ship for two years. Two years ..." This time, Nicholas would not let himself be hushed.

"It's not a ship, Mort. It's a van. And they're going to roll it down that hill and into the sea with all your From the Beach

friends inside." Nicholas was wondering what he was doing here, out on this beach covered with trash, with radio noises hissing all around, with his brother who'd never gone anywhere or seen anything. His brother, who still lived in the house where his parents had died, who had filled it with beer cans and pieces of wood and sand in the carpets. His brother, who slept on the beach, lived in the waves ...

Jesus Christ, Nicholas thought. I should be at work.

Mort had taken his arm again, and was leading him back toward the others. "It is a spaceship, Nick. You said it yourself: you didn't know what alien was supposed to be like. You got no idea ..."

And then, something changed. The grip went tight. "You're coming with us, Nick. I don't care. We'll kick your ass and tie you up."

"You're coming. That's it. That's all." Mort walked away, his head down between his shoulders, confused. And, yes, Nicholas decided, he was coming. It was either gone or crashed into the sea. He would not go back without knowing.

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His eyes found the kid. He'd chipped another record. "Disco." Nick grinned. "Crap anyway." He flung it away.

"Your parents know you're here?"

Nick blinked. "Told 'em yesterday." He hefted a stack of records. "Said, 'Mom. Dad. I'm going into space to surf with aliens.' They said 'Cool. Be back by eleven.' He shifted the records onto his head.

Nicholas watched him go. It was settled, then. They would launch a van into outer space. They would leave the Earth from the bench.

Squatted atop the hill, the Volkswagen van was pointed straight out to sea. And, now that Nicholas really looked at it, really gave it his hardest stare, it did seem vaguely aerodynamic and more than a little alien. The old man, who was called by no other name, had explained the whole design to Nicholas, how he had constructed the ship just so. He had spoken in a German accent eroded by California slang, scratching his belly as they circled the Volkswagen. He and Togo had gone over the major points, but Nicholas couldn't recall a word. Something about gravity and something else about acceleration. Now he gaped at the pipes, bits of bathroom tile, and other salvages that had been welded onto the body. He was afraid to touch them. Afraid they might break off.

Someone, the guy Mort called Schmeizer, had decorated the thing with a spray can. Cupids, stars, fish in dripping yellow.

Nicholas felt something grip his shoulder. Turning around ... it was Bean, his army jacket and his dead fish hand.

"S'time, man." The Oriental pointed. The others were climbing into the back of the van. Nicholas looked around. "Shit," he thought. "What'll happen to the shack, Mort's boat?" He raised a hand. "What ..."

"Absorbed," Bean said. "It'll all be chopped up, dragged away, stolen. Absorbed."

Nicholas took a long, slow look at the beach. The ocean, dirty gray, spread out to the sky. Birds hanging over the sand, a stretch of hills. The sun, set high up and far away into the blue. What if he died, in there? What if he never came back?

He got in the van.

Nicholas was wrapped in the raincoat Nick had given him. "Spacesuit, man. Might get cold out there." He tried to think about nothing but the fact that he'd be there soon. Other planet or down in the water. He'd be there.

There were eleven of them back there, which was an amazing feat in itself. And then there was the junk. Everywhere. Underneath. In between. Twisted around bodies. If he opened his mouth, Nicholas expected that some piece of clothing, some tiny sea animal, might be shoved inside. A potted fern had been jammed onto his lap. From between its leaves, he could see two faces. Yusuf, the Arab

with the teeth, was half-standing, his back bent against the carpet of the ceiling. He flashed a white smile, rolled his shoulders. The other woman, whose name Nicholas couldn't recall, had been squashed under one of his suitcases. Nicholas caught a glimpse of army jacket, the tan of his brother's back, pointed nails. From somewhere, Nick was singing a cartoon theme song. There were bumps on the roof ... someone strapping down surfboards. A burp, and laughter.

"Hey, man. Catch." A soccer ball crushed Nicholas's fern.

The engine coughed, coughed again, and started. Nicholas heard Togo and the old German arguing over a map. The van jolted and was moving.

"Hey, what if we wreck in space?" It was Nick's voice.

"S'okay. We got canned food, TV dinners. Got beer ..."

The fern jumped, twisted, and spilled dirt over Nicholas. He grabbed for the soccer ball. Caught it. They were tilted, moving downhill, catching speed. Everything shifted, scratched toward the front of the van. Very loudly, glass cracked. A salt water splash in Nicholas's face. He saw a fish flip, its body frozen twisted silver for an instant. Then the van hit sand, dug in hard, wheels grinding. They were moving, moving, faster. A laugh. And the inside spun around, turning, on its side, the world spilling over. Nicholas choked on water, a fish in his mouth. He spat. They hit. Hard. Someone screamed. His face was tight against the soccer ball, knees curled up, going fetal. Yusuf sprawled overhead, that smile going by. They stopped. Very hard.

And Nick was singing again. Same song. He'd picked it up where he'd left off.

Nicholas was pushing. Out, out. He had to get out. There was crap everywhere, animals, arms and legs squirming. A hand in his face. A dog's yelp. Seawater. A beer can spun underfoot. One door was jammed open, the world on its side. He saw sand, water, and then he was in it, crawling, stumbling, and then he was running. He was kicking up sand. Where was he going?

Nicholas stopped.

He had flown. He was on a beach. He was in California. He had gone nowhere.

And then, Nicholas looked up. The sun, going down. The evening sky, a dirty orange, with mountains at the edges.

The sinking sun, too small.

He was gone. □

Blind spots

Recently I was dismayed to learn that I have a "floater" — a bunch of organic material which has decided to float about inside my right eye, occasionally obscuring the vision.

In learning about my movable blind spot, I realized that I'd had another. "Floaters," you see, usually occur when you get older, and I'd never thought of myself that way — older. Most of us have these blind spots.

Republicans have blind spots for anything proposed by a Democrat, and vice versa. But since this is a science fiction magazine, I'll limit my discussion to science and SF.

Back in the late 1970s, a woman who lives in my city learned her son had childhood leukemia. On her visits to Children's Hospital in Boston to get Jimmy treated, she noticed there seemed to be many parents from Woburn at the hospital.

A few years before, two water wells in the east portion of the city were turned on to meet higher demands. This continued for several years, much to the annoyance of the East Woburn residents, because the water was aesthetically displeasing. It had an odor, left rust-colored stains on clothing, fixtures, and inside the dishwashers. But the city, and state, insisted the water was fine. It had a high iron and manganese content, which accounted (they said) for most of the discolorations.

Anne Anderson didn't believe them. She got nowhere with city or state officials, all experts. They all said the same thing.

Then in 1979, a midnight dumper left 184 barrels of chemicals on a vacant lot. I was working as a reporter at the time for the local newspaper and saw the report at the police station. The next day the state's environmental agency was at the site. I pointed out to the investigators that the barrels were dumped alongside the Aberjona River, which flowed right past the two wells in East Woburn. The state tested the wells with a new device, a gas chromatograph, and found unacceptably high levels of TCE (trichloroethylene). Anne read about the closing of the wells and felt her suspicions were confirmed. Her parish priest, Rev. Bruce Young, listened to her. They spoke with me about their suspicions, and they began to chart the locations of the other children with childhood leukemia. On the map, it was blatantly obvious. There seemed to be a cluster of cases — 13 in the area served by the wells.

But I wanted some benchmark, some objective criteria by which to measure

the cluster.

They dug up a state-wide health study done by the University of Massachusetts. This provided considerable data, but nothing appeared to be drastically out of the ordinary, a spike here or there, nothing of "statistical significance" (officials for "Wow! What have we got here?"). In the process of examining the report, I learned that another study was underway, and that it was being compiled by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH). I pestered, and pestered, and finally was able to set up an appointment to go in and look over the data. The day before I was scheduled to go in, the *Boston Herald* ran a front page story, quoting the DPH, stating there were no health problems in Woburn, even though a group of citizens felt there was a childhood leukemia cluster.

I met with one of the statisticians at the DPH and we went over the data in the computer. Everything seemed normal. Then I noticed something. The statistics were based upon the census of 1970, which was 10 years out of date. I asked if he had a more recent census to use, knowing that one was done every five years. He found the most recent census, plugged it into the health data and suddenly it was very clear that Anne Anderson had been right. Not only was there a peak of leukemia cases, there were several other cancers which were of "statistical significance".

The tech went to warn his boss something was wrong, and the next day I wrote the story which confirmed Anne's worst fears. All hell broke loose, and Anne, myself, and several others, became instant pariahs in that portion of the community involved in real estate sales. City Hall wasn't too pleased, either.

More than three months later the DPH came out with its "official" report, which revealed data identical to what I had written in my story. I might add, that I had refused to write about the leukemia until I was able to verify that there really was a cluster. That was 13 years ago, but it taught me a lot about blind spots — scientific blind spots.

The very first blind spot, is that scientists and "experts" refuse, generally, to listen to civilians — even when they have good arguments, and may be right.

Something even more curious happened, as well. Two researchers at Harvard University's graduate school of biostatistics decided to conduct a study to see if there was a link between exposure to the well water, and childhood leukemia, or certain other birth defects

and illnesses.

Their study found a direct correlation between exposure to the well water and a number of illnesses, including childhood leukemia. I say "exposure," as did the scientists, because you are more at risk from certain organic chemicals when you take a shower, than when you drink the stuff, because most of the chemicals can be absorbed directly through the skin, and because they evaporate and are breathed into the lungs.

A large section of the scientific community disputed the Harvard findings, arguing that volunteers from the community tainted the process, among other things. Yet, curiously, from the time the wells were shut down, the rate of childhood leukemia decreased, eventually returning to normal. This month's issue of *Environment* magazine discusses this reluctance of scientists to accept the insights of civilians.

As I see it, the biggest problem is that it takes years of education, and years of work for scientists to become "experts" in their fields, and that makes them reluctant to listen to someone with little or no scientific education — even when that someone is living smack dab in the middle of a phenomenon.

The other problem is that experts, by the nature of the educational process, are only experts of the "known." Very few are trained to be experts of the unknown. Very few are encouraged to stick their necks out, even to ask questions — which is the opposite of what pure science is, or should be, about.

For instance, we still don't know what caused the leukemia. It's currently impossible to determine the synergistic effects of the 64 chemicals eventually found in the groundwater.

We aren't immune to this incidence of expert "blind spots" in SF, either.

Isaac Asimov wrote wonderful tales employing the literary convention of FTL, yet regularly insisted faster than light flight is impossible — just like Einstein, who, when faced with quantum mechanics, argued that God does play dice with the universe. Isaac wouldn't have phrased it quite like that because he also didn't believe in God, but you get the point. Isaac, and Ray Bradbury, refused to fly in an airplane. And there are those in the field who think that SF died when John W. Campbell died.

Here, I'd like to think my "blind spot" is that I refuse to accept anything as the final word. There are always questions...

Which is how it should be in SF, science, and life. □

The Rosebush

By Anthony Ellis
Art by Charles Lang

Sometimes you can't stop yourself from thinking. You open that Pandora's box in your head where all your darkest thoughts and memories are locked away, and out they spill again. With me, it's usually the memory of Enthar.

There was a plastic road from the landing-ground that ran the length of the valley where Maynes and his family had lived for the past twelve years; it clung to the sheerest, highest slopes, and the view from the glass dome of my buggy was spectacular. Jungle covered everything, like a huge, coarsely woven blanket draped over the landscape. Random fragments of the ruined city poked through, locked in a silent, losing battle with the monstrous vegetation. Here a building like a temple, simultaneously held up and undermined by the enormous creepers boring into it; there a stone monument, its alien symbolism shaped by the things growing on it into something more alien still.

You never forget the strangeness of your first alien planet, and Enthar was mine. Perhaps that's all it was.

At the head of the valley, on the tip of a spur of land perhaps a thousand feet above the valley floor, was the castle of Doctor Maynes. My home for the next two weeks. Like the ruins in the jungle, its walls were stained pale green with algae, but with lighter patches where repairs had been made with newer stone. The vines that climbed the walls also recalled the ruins, but here they had been trained. "Castle" was just a name, of course — a joke; the building hadn't been built to be defended. But the impression of strength and permanence it gave, and the way it commanded the valley below, made you see why the name had stuck.

I switched the buggy to manual and guided it to a halt in one corner of the broad gravel drive, and emerged from its air-conditioned interior into the hot, heavy climate of another world. I was hauling the last of my cases out of the storage compartment when Maynes came down the front steps of the house. The holes I had seen at college had not prepared me for the presence of this tall, powerfully built man. Beyond a few streaks of gray in that dark bushy beard, had he not aged perceptibly in the years since they had been taken. And his eyes still burned with the same fiery intent.

"You must be Edward Hammond."

We shook hands, and he helped me carry my cases into a cool stone hall inside the castle. The walls

were clad in white marble shot through with strands like wisps of green cobweb. The hand-woven rug on the floor must have been made by Eleanor, Maynes's wife, and I was about to say something complimentary about it, but Maynes was already sweeping out of the room.

He led me on a tour of the ground floor, too briskly for me to make anything but the sketchiest impression of their house. Only over the days to come did I get a feel for the place: the quiet, cool rooms; the homemade rugs and wall hangings; the odd mix of plastic and wooden furniture. In almost every room one found ceramic pots and figurines standing on shelves or little tables, and one or more of Eleanor Maynes's paintings. Many of the other furnishings were also her handiwork.

When he reached his own rooms in the north wing Maynes slowed down a little. I was shown the computer room, where the Doctor's applied simulator greeted me politely, and the library, which contained an impressively large collection of books and data slides. The first book I picked up in that room was written by Maynes himself.

Downstairs from the library and at the back of the house was the vivarium, a large L-shaped room partially buried by the slope of the land, so that the row of arched windows at the top of the rear wall gave a ground-level view of the garden beyond the castle. Enclosures of various sizes lined the perimeter of the room, and a central island of tables served as an impromptu laboratory, cluttered with equipment, papers, and Entharian artifacts. A computer-generated model of the valley stood next to this.

"It's not actually complete yet," said Maynes, noticing my interest in the model. "A lot of the detail is fractally generated, it shows up at higher magnifications. I based it on the records of the First Expedition. I'm adding to it, gradually."

I found the castle, near the edge of the projection field. It looked very small, and the valley very big.

"It must be quite an experience," I said, "being the only human beings on a whole planet."

"It's an opportunity without parallel — I can tell you. I'm the sole researcher of an entire *field* of my discipline; how many other scientists can say that?"

That wasn't quite what I had meant, but Maynes, eager to illustrate his point, was already heading



toward the nearest of the vivaria.

It was a glass tank, filled to a depth of about five centimeters with soil and forest litter. A crustacean creature, eight-legged and about the size of my open hand, picked its way about methodically. Its shell was mottled and uneven, as if a lichen-covered stone had grown legs.

"Recognize it?"

I'd been trying to, but it didn't belong to any of the hundred-odd major Entharian species I knew.

"You wouldn't. It's one of the dozens of new species I've discovered since I came here. Watch this." He took a pen from my jacket pocket, reached into the tank with it and tapped the creature on its carapace.

It shattered. Like a puzzle-box coming apart, the body broke into a dozen smaller components. The legs thrashed away in all directions like little snakes, and with tiny legs of their own the other pieces scuttled off as well. The little life forms swiftly hid themselves among the debris, and within seconds it was as if the tank had never been occupied.

"They'll re-form in about ten minutes or so," Maynes told me.

"What if you removed one of the pieces?"

"Then the composite formed would be slightly different — but still able to function. The component creatures are quite versatile."

"Suppose it was a vital piece, like one of the legs?"

Maynes shrugged. "The result would be a creature with six legs instead of eight. Bilateral symmetry is conserved."

"The extra leg is discarded?"

"The composite eats it."

That evening I had my first meal with the Maynes family, *al fresco*. We ate at a little table on a mosaic-floored patio behind the house, as the shadows in the garden multiplied and the first pinprick stars appeared. The patio was one of two, separated by a small ornamental pool. Ours was within a pergola of crumbling stone arches and newer wooden cross-beams, entwined by an Entharian vine.

Nicola, the Maynes's daughter, was a girl a year or two younger than me, with long blond hair and the most astonishingly blue eyes — two characteristics plainly inherited from her mother. She sat with me on a stone bench on one side of the table, eating quietly and saying little. Maynes and I did most of the talking, and Maynes most of that. He was outlining the work we would be covering over the days to come when Eleanor unexpectedly spoke up.

"No one has sent a student to my husband in over a year," she said to me. "Your college must think you very wise."

It seemed an embarrassing sort of a compliment. I chose to deflect it. "Perhaps they'll get the League to give me a planet too," I joked.

Maynes laughed. "Nobody 'gave' me Enthar, Edward, I had to cajole it out of them. As far as they were concerned, Enthar was just another unimportant world too far from the primary group to justify further exploration. The First Expedition had already done all that was necessary, there were new worlds to investigate, et cetera, et cetera. They simply couldn't see that there is so much still to be learned here. I got my way in the end, of course."

We had finished the main course by this time, and were eating fruit from plain metal bowls. The sun had died somewhere out of sight. The garden was dark, the table lit by a globe floating discreetly above our heads. Behind me the fountain in the ornamental pool gurgled and splashed, cooling the night air.

"You've certainly found an idyllic home base," I said.

"It's perfect, isn't it? The First Expedition restored it all. They used the castle as their center of operations. When we first came here, of course, it had been deserted again for the past forty-odd years and had all gone back to nature."

"It looks beautiful now." I said, smiling at Eleanor.

"Yes, the Entharians were great architects," Maynes said. "I have some more holographs you should —"

"I meant the way your wife has decorated it," I said. "The paintings, and the rugs and ceramics."

"Do you like my things?" Eleanor asked. She seemed genuinely curious.

"Very much; you're very talented. And you've done so much, too: the castle's like an art gallery."

She smiled. "Machines do all the work here. If I didn't paint, and make things, my days would be long and empty."

"They must be very empty for you now, then." Nicola said, addressing no one in particular. She turned to face me. Her face was placid, composed, but I almost drowned in those blue eyes. Eyes larger and deeper than her mother's, I saw now. "Mother doesn't paint much any more," she explained. "Do you, Mother?"

"I stopped for a while, Nicola, that was all. Now I have started again."

This exchange was so brief and so placidly made that a moment later I wasn't sure if I had imagined the antagonism that had seemed to fuel it. Members of families have their own ways of talking to each other, and it is easy to hear things that aren't really there when they do.

"Stopped?"

"Just for a while, yes."

"It was a few months ago," Nicola said, her eyes still on me. "One day she was working on a painting,

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and the next she just ... stopped. Isn't that odd?"

"I wanted to reassess what I was doing," Eleanor explained to me. "Now I am painting and sculpting again."

"Did you notice the Entharian pieces?" Maynes asked, commandeering the conversation again. "All from the valley. The First Expedition took away all the artifacts they'd found when they pulled out, but there's plenty left to find down there. Are you familiar with Entharian art, Edward? Intriguing style."

"Have you made much progress investigating the Entharian civilization?" I asked. Under the table, Nicola pressed her naked leg firmly against my own. I was wearing shorts, and every cell in my leg seemed to register the contact.

"I wish I could say that I had," Maynes said, deflating slightly, "but the truth is I've come up with very little. The Entharians are still an enigma, as much now as when the First Expedition was here. We still have no sense of who they were as a *people*. The clues we find in their cities offer nothing more than hints, fragments of a culture too alien to piece together."

"The Entharian language must be a great barrier," I said politely.

"And there's so much to translate! Even a tenth of the writings I've got on record could tell us so much if we could only understand them. What they believed in, what emotions they knew ... What caused their extinction — the biggest mystery of all."

A silence fell over the table. Creatures called to each other somewhere in the night, in whooping shrieks or low chattering. The endless music of the fountain wove in and out of my awareness. I tried not to notice, or think about the steady pressure of Nicola's thigh against mine, and the question of whether she was even aware of what she was doing to me. Neither did I move my leg away.

Not long afterwards, when I was undressing for bed in my room, I noticed for the first time a watercolor that hung on one wall.

It was one of Eleanor's, the style and visualization immediately recognizable. From the right-hand edge of the picture a large white wall, buttressed and old, led down the slope of a hill beside a rough, dusty road that turned the corner where the wall ended. Tall, dark cypresses grew on either side of the wall, and in the background a rocky mountain rose, and above that an immense white cloud. The colors were predominantly pale and washed, as if faded by the sun, suggesting the dry heat of the Mediterranean.

Perhaps it was just the lack of a foreground subject, but the painting seemed to have an air of expectation, of imminence, like an empty stage. One felt that at any moment a picturesque peasant, or a

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god, or anything at all, might come around the corner and begin toiling up the empty road.

I slept until quite late the following morning — travel always fatigues me. When I came downstairs the house appeared deserted. I found the remains of long-finished breakfast on the table in the dining room.

A clock on the wall spoke. "Good morning, Mr. Hammond. I trust you slept well. Doctor Maynes has instructed me to tell you that this morning he is taking the opportunity to finish off certain outstanding pieces of research, so that he may begin fresh projects with you. While he is so detained, it is his wish that you pass the time as you please."

I ate a light breakfast, then stepped through the open French windows onto the patio where we had eaten the night before. It was an excellent morning in which to have nothing to do: bright, hot, and with a lazy breeze wafting the mingled fragrances of a thousand exotically painted flowers about the garden.

Large, and particularly long, the garden sloped upwards towards a distant thicket of giant ferns. It had no proper borders, the cultivated vegetation meshing featurelessly into the jungle that surrounded it. Far beyond the end of the garden, the greenery swept dramatically up into the peak that sealed the head of the valley. Among all the strange flora, I was surprised to find one plant that was native to Earth: a small rosebush, growing out of a little rockery at the base of the ornamental pool. The buds were pink, but they had not quite opened yet and I couldn't be sure of the species.

"Good morning, Mr. Hammond."

It was Nicola, sitting at one of the circular stone tables on the patio on the other side of the pool, partially hidden by the small trees that grew there out of openings in the mosaic floor.

"Good morning. May I join you?"

I walked over when she smiled and took a seat at her table. At first there didn't seem to be any particular need for conversation. We were pleasantly shaded by the trees, and I could have sat there looking at her until further notice. But the way her eyes were set so unwaveringly on mine began to remind me uncomfortably of the previous evening, and I looked about for distraction. I noticed the mosaic.

In a confusion of different tableaux, it depicted the darkly blue-skinned Entharians locked in unarmed combat, running, and suffering floggings and torture with knives.

"Strange," I said. "Is the other one like this?"

"See for yourself." She seemed amused, distant.

I went over to the patio on the other side of the pool, and for the first time examined carefully the mosaic there, which was quite effectively obscured by the table and benches. Moving some of these

about, I found that it showed scenes of feasting, of what I took to be ceremonial activities, and, most strikingly, an orgy, the hermaphroditic Entharrians piled on top of each other in a mass of blue bodies. It didn't explain the other mosaic, as I had hoped it might.

I returned to my seat with Nicola. "There are fragments of mosaics and murals down in the valley showing scenes like these." I told her, pointing with my foot. "Your father was showing me holographs yesterday. They seem to have been important to the Entharrians."

When she made no comment I added:

"Your father thinks they're rites of passage, into maturity. All primitive Earth cultures had them."

"But you don't agree with him."

"I don't know. Those were always *trials*, in primitive cultures, and these look like ... I don't know. Something else."

"Selections." She was no longer looking at me, or at anything in particular. "To find the strongest and the fittest. That was how they found the ones among them who came closest to perfection."

"What about the beatings?" I asked. "And the ones being cut with knives? Torture's hardly a competitive sport."

"That was to find the ones who could stand pain. The weak would break, and the ones who were left would be the strong."

It seemed a harsh portrait of a race that had produced so much that was beautiful.

"What about the other mosaic?" I asked. "Can you tie that in too?"

"You have to see the middle one to understand."

"What do you mean," I asked, "the middle one?"

"There are three. It's a sequence. Look, I'll show you." She rose to her feet, and as she guided me towards the pool with its chuckling fountain, suddenly I guessed.

Under the dancing water of the pool was a third mosaic, forming a triptych with the other two. It offered no answers, however. Four Entharrians, cut and bleeding, stood in the midst of some ceremony. In another scene the same four were being beheaded. In a third, headless bodies — presumably of the same form — were being hacked to pieces. And in a fourth, the pieces were being gathered in metallic bowls. It seemed to carry on from the first mosaic, with its beatings and contests, but the only connection I could make between it and the third, with its feasts and orgies, was a somewhat unpleasant one.

Nicola's reflection appeared in the water beside mine. "They wanted to be as strong and perfect as the ones who won the contests," she said. "That's what the feast was for. And afterwards they copulated, while the qualities of the perfect ones were still strong enough within them to shape their seed, so that their children would be born strong, too."

She trailed her hands in the water, and I was distracted by the slim shape of her arm. I watched the shattered images reform: the bodies being cut up, the bodies being gathered.

"You're saying they ate the perfect ones."

"That's right."

"The ritual sacrifice that unifies the community. It's a thought."

"Except for the heads. They didn't eat the heads. It was probably forbidden."

She giggled, as if she found something deliciously funny about the idea.

That afternoon Maynes took me down into the valley. As before, he talked extensively about his work: research completed and research yet to begin. I began to realize how starved he must be for an informed audience.

"There are never enough hours in the day," he explained to me. "Not to fit into one lifetime all the research that still needs to be done here. Xenobiology is an ongoing process, not a report to fill in once and file away forever."

We had come to the forecourt of a building that was now little more than a shell. The area was walled in on all sides by jungle, and the once level paving blocks had been heaved up by invading trees. Their tall, straight trunks were not unlike pillars, and the green canopy they supported not unlike an arched ceiling, prompting the thought that it was the jungle that was the real city, and the crumbling ruins in its midst the intruding growth. Some of the overgrown stonework around us bore faded pictures of Entharrians; dark-skinned, naked, lithe; they seemed the natural inhabitants of such a city.

"... His name was Campbell. A botanist, primarily, and of course the anthropologists used that against him, said he'd seen something else like a tree-squid or something and mistaken it, and so forth. In the end he capitulated."

Talking of reports had steered Maynes's talk onto the records of the First Expedition, but I barely heard him. The unlikely concepts can sometimes, for an instant, seem so real as to blot out reality, and for a moment I was possessed by the conviction that the jungle really *was* the city, and that Maynes and I had been wandering unwittingly through its halls and boulevards all the while.

"But his original statement was kept on file, you see, and a few years ago I dug it up. According to that, he'd simply been prodding around in the undergrowth for specimens, when he'd practically walked into it. They just stood there looking at each other for a moment, then it turned and melted back into the jungle, not to be seen again. End of story."

Coming back to myself, I nodded.

Maynes was a great scientist, perhaps brilliant, and his enthusiasm for his work was infectious, revitalizing in me that boyish curiosity that had first drawn me to xenobiology, long ago superseded by the more prosaic motivations that a college education tends to instill. But such a person does not always make an ideal teacher.

During the course of my second morning on Enthar I asked Maynes some trivial questions regarding the work we had started, studying behavior patterns in Entharian animals. He answered it, but afterwards seemed preoccupied, sometimes hardly even aware that I was there, and I realized that my question had sparked off some new line of research in his mind. When our work ground to a halt altogether, I left him to it and went out to the garden for a change of air.

The little Earth rosebush there was still a puzzle to me, and I squatted down to examine it more closely. I was peering and poking at it when Nicola said:

"Are you looking for something?"

She stepped from the French window, dressed casually and barefoot. I stood up.

"I was looking at the rose."

"I can show you some of the other plants, if you want."

So she led me on a slow meandering walk through the garden, past flower beds and arbors and vine-clad, crumbling stonework. I registered the colors and the shapes of the flowers, and perhaps their alien beauty, but that was all. I was distracted by the graceful presence of Nicola. At one point I asked her the name of a flowering plant.

"You mean its Earth name?"

"What other is there?"

"The name the old people had for it."

"You mean the Entharians?" I asked. "How could you know what they called it?"

"I didn't say I did."

It is never a very agreeable thing to be talking to someone and to have no idea whether they are making fun of you or not — least of all when that someone is a pretty woman. But I only struggled on.

"Do you know the Earth name, then?" I asked.

"That's Father's department. Something in Latin."

This response surprised me. "You're not familiar with your father's classification system?"

"It's a very boring classification system," she said. Then she giggled. "And it's wrong."

"Wrong? How?"

"What a lot of questions you ask, Mr. Hammond." She moved off across the lawn, but slowly enough I felt, to indicate that I was supposed to accompany her.

"I'm sorry," I said, catching up with her. "You must have questions of your own. About Earth, I The Rosebush

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mean."

"Earth doesn't matter. Not this far out."

"No? What does matter, then?"

"Just being."

We came to the end of the garden, where the lawn gave way to shrubs, which gave way to giant ferns. Nicola pushed her way through the shrubs as if they didn't exist, and I saw that there was actually the narrowest of paths here, leading away into the giant ferns and the jungle beyond them.

The ferns grew quite densely, so that garden and castle were quickly lost from view. Sunlight filtered down through the leaves overhead, green and dim. The land continued to rise, and without the breeze it became quite a trek. Nicola walked ahead at a quick pace, showing no sign of fatigue.

After several minutes the terrain leveled out and I began to hear the sound of running water. All at once we were at the edge of a small pool beneath a wall of rock, under a dome of interlocking greenery. Water gushed from a cleft in the rock down into the pool, marking a boundary beyond which the land — what little of it I could see — seemed to rise more steeply: here the spur on which the castle was built flowed into the upper heights of the valley.

"This is my secret place," Nicola said, turning to me. I saw that in fact she was perspiring and as short of breath as I was. But her manner was as cool as always. "I come here to get away from the castle. Do you like it?"

"It's very peaceful. Do you swim here?"

"The pool's not for swimming. It's for hiding."

It occurred to me that perhaps she meant that the pool was for hiding *things*. She continued to look at me, her eyes as deep as the pool, which seemed bottomless in the limited light.

"Why have you brought me here, then?" I asked.

Now she smiled. "Why do you think?"

Sex. Was that what she wanted? A thrill, a fulfillment, a titillation not ordinarily available to her? Or was I only reading what my own desire wrote into that ambiguous smile?

"I don't know," I said. "Tell me."

"I'll show you."

She extended her hand to me, palm up. I started to move towards her and something wet struck my cheek, halting me. I became aware of a quiet, enveloping noise, like hundreds of tiny muted drums around and above me. Another drop struck me, and another. Another fell into Nicola's still outstretched hand.

The noise became louder, as if drawing strength from my awareness of it. The leaf cover overhead was well spread but not waterproof, and the rain came through it in a mounting barrage of huge isolated droplets.

"We'd better get back to the house," Nicola said, her voice clear against the rumble of rain on leaves.

Her hand dropped to her side.

Her eyes met mine as she passed me. I followed wordlessly.

The downpour picked up as we hurried down the path, until the noise of it was deafening. When we emerged into the garden we ran, and were soaked before we reached the patio. As we rushed past, my eyes fell for a moment on the little rosebush, stoically enduring this alien deluge.

I found Maynes less preoccupied when I returned to him late that afternoon, and our work began again. Because the downpour made fieldwork impossible, we made use of creatures from the vivarium. At one point, Maynes led me past a tank which contained ordinary Earth mice, running to and fro on a surface of matting.

"*Mus musculus*. I grow them myself, of course. You tend to go through rather a lot of test animals over the years, and it's too expensive to keep shipping them in. The i-ship charges out here are hideously expensive, as I'm sure your college was at pains to point out to you." He came back down the row with a square plastic container, which he placed in front of the mouse cage. I saw that it contained a small Entharian creature, hairless, with blue-black skin. Smooth, seamless skin. Like plastic.

"A member of the protean family," I said, recognizing the characteristics.

Maynes nodded. "Presumably you've seen them in action?"

"Many times." I was watching the mice scurrying about in their tank. I could guess what was coming next, and half-hoped that my answer would dissuade Maynes from continuing.

It didn't. Maynes reached into the tank, grasped a mouse, and deposited it in the smaller container with the little Entharian animal. Pink nose working furiously, the mouse stayed exactly where it was, nervously eying its cellmate. They were about the same size.

"I've been keeping the Hoyle's Scavenger in isolation for the last few days," Maynes murmured, his eyes on the little tabebu in the container. "It's usually enough. It triggers the belief that the local ecological niche is shrinking. There it goes."

With slow, careful movements the Entharian animal stalked towards the mouse. The mouse became more agitated, but didn't run. Irrationally, I wondered what was going through its little mind. Then, in a flurry of movement, the dark-skinned creature killed the mouse. We watched as it cracked the skull open with its jaws, and ate the brain.

"Now," Maynes breathed.

Stepping back from the little corpse, the creature settled on the floor of the tank. Already its smooth skin was bulging and swelling. Within a minute the creature was almost unrecognizable — just a black,

shapeless little blob.

"That's very fast," I said.

Maynes nodded without shifting his gaze. "The Hoyle's Scavenger is about the fastest of the protean species."

The blob in the container began to regain form. Its dark pigment faded to pale translucent pink, making it look almost embryonic — more so as tiny limbs re-emerged. Fur sprouted, like mold growing on a piece of meat, and thickened. The shape moved. Sniffed the air. It was a mouse.

"All set to assume a new life," Maynes said. "Only, of course, we're not going to let it. It's deserved its meal, though, I suppose." So saying, he took the counterfeit from the container and placed it in the larger mouse enclosure. Immediately it scurried over to the little feeding trough. The other mice at the trough sniffed at it incuriously as it fed.

"It certainly seems to have *them* fooled," I said.

"Oh, indeed. You understand that it's acquired not just the physical characteristics of its victim, but the behavioral, too?"

I nodded to suggest that I was intimately aware of this fact. "A protean life form is capable of invading both the ecological and socio-biological environment of its victim," I quoted.

"Just so. And now it's time for you to return to your kind, my little friend." He removed a white, wiggling bundle of fur from the trough and placed it in the plastic container. Quickly I grabbed the mouse that had been next to it.

"You've got the wrong one, Doctor," I said.

That night, my third on Enthar, Nicola slipped into bed with me: a cool, nude shape in the dark. It was novel and absurdly pleasing to find myself the more experienced partner for a change, but it was she who was the dominant one; so fierce, so demanding, that it was a little unnerving. Where was the aloof, distant Nicola of the daytime?

I was waiting for her when she came again the following night, and the night after that, it was I who went to her.

Over the days that followed, Maynes and I continued to conduct research in the vivarium and field studies down in the valley, and I began to learn aspects of xenobiology that no amount of course work could ever have taught me. I felt that when I rejoined my fellow students and tutors I would dazzle them with my expertise.

Spending so much time with Maynes meant that I saw little of Nicola or Eleanor, however. We even had our meals in the Doctor's rooms, so that we could eat without leaving our work. This was the Doctor's normal practice. That first meal on the patio had been something of a special event, I learned.

When the fifteenth day came, it was time for me to leave. The computer on my orbiting i-ship transmitted a request that I board by midday, so there was no time for me to do any last work with the Doctor. Instead, I got up later than usual and breakfasted with Nicola and Eleanor.

Before I even sat down at the table I was conscious again of how alike mother and daughter were, not just in appearance, but in peculiarities, as well. Both had that quiet, dreaming remoteness, as if



Our Next Issue

The next issue of *Aboriginal SF* (Spring 1994) will contain some debuts by a handful of new writers and the return of several *Aboriginal* regulars including Ann K. Schwader and Chuck Rothman. It will also mark return appearances by K. D. Wentworth, Denise Heald, and J. Brooks.

Here's the lineup: "SlurpGlop" by Greg Jones, art by Larry Blamire; "A Tin Tear" by Robert A. Metzger, art by Alan Gutierrez; "Trophy" by Wendy A. Conner, art by David LeClerc; "Earth Kwaatsai" by Ann K. Schwader, art by Allison Fiona Hershey; "The Grassman" by Martin McMullen, art by Clyde Duensing, III; "Deathsong" by Janis O'Connor, art by N. Taylor Blanchard; "Prisoners of Time" by Daniel Lissman, art by David LeClerc; "Hands Across the Stars" by Jeff Janoda, art by Larry Blamire; "Revisions" by Chuck Rothman, art by Jael; "First Person Plural" by Jeff Elliott, art by Peggy Ranson; "The Last Snicker" by Sally Kohonoski, art by Carol Heyer; "Shore Leave" by K.D. Wentworth, art by Jon Foster; "Play the Wind" by Denise Heald, art by Charles Lang; "Three things to Watch for When You Are in the Market for a Used Tumor" by J. Brooks, art by Jon Foster.

they were listening to an inner music; both smiled at me in the same unreadable way.

Nor were they talkative, which felt odd for a last day. Not until we had almost finished, did Eleanor say, without looking up, "I hope you have enjoyed your stay, Mr. Hammond."

"Edward," I said. "I have, thank you. Very much." I felt self-conscious, as if I were lying. *I had* enjoyed my stay, and for more than one reason, but I was still glad to be going now. Enthar was not a world on which to stay for long. It was too empty, too haunted by the vanished builders of its cities. And my hosts had become too much a part of it.

Without having said a word, Nicola got to her feet and left the room. She was perhaps my strongest reason for being glad to leave. I had never come to understand her, as I had once hoped, and as the days had passed, this incomprehension had grown by degrees into unease. I had broken off my nocturnal visits to her room, and she had not come again to mine.

Rather half-heartedly, I tried to keep Eleanor talking. Goodbyes always leave me feeling uncomfortable, and the coming one promised to be awkward.

"Don't you ever feel like taking a vacation from Enthar?" I asked. "Seeing Earth again, or going to the Mythos worlds?"

She smiled again. "Not any more."

"I suppose you have everything you need here."

The conversation limped on for a while, until I made some excuse and withdrew upstairs. For the next half-hour I packed and rearranged my possessions, while huge rain clouds massed outside, darkening the sky. After the distractions that packing had to offer had been exhausted, I began to feel restless. But I didn't want to go downstairs for more frustrating conversations with Nicola and her mother, and Maynes, I knew, would be busy until the very moment came for me to leave. To kill time, I began to wander the cool stone passages and halls of the second floor.

Something, perhaps the paintings I saw, led me to the room Eleanor used for her studio in the heart of the castle. Gloomy in the feeble illumination that the rain clouds allowed through the skylight, it smelled faintly of the paints she used. I made out a loom standing in one corner, holding some half-finished piece of work, and in another corner a mobile kiln. Empty picture frames, a tub of clay, canvases and other such things were visible among the shadows, the bric-a-brac of an artistic and industrious woman. The central floor space was occupied by an easel, but from where I stood in the doorway, the painting it held couldn't be seen. I walked over to it.

The style was unmistakably Eleanor's; she had caught in her brushstrokes dusk in the very act of

giving way to night, and the way darkness seems to pool at that time. It was far from finished, but after a moment, the dense crisscross of preliminary strokes resolved into a view of the castle, seen from the bottom of the garden. Foliage dominated the canvas, as if the viewer were peering through the shrubbery. As with the picture in my room, and much of her other work, there was a strong feeling of expectation. What was about to happen?

Then I saw them.

Or thought I did; in the murky half-light of the studio it wasn't possible to be certain. But in the blurred confusion of undergrowth at the extreme right of the picture was what might have been the beginnings of a human form. A figure, watching the house. And in the bottom left, what looked like another. Both figures — if that was what they were — had been limned darkly, in accordance with the fleeting light of the picture, making them appear black, or darkly blue.

What I saw disturbed me in a way I didn't want to think about — but I had to be sure, and so I turned to go to the light switch by the door. Eleanor was standing there.

Smiling.

"Nicola told you that I'd stopped painting, when we had that meal on the patio. Do you remember? And I had." Now the smile seemed almost sad. "Traits of personality, interests, they simply don't endure. But something made me start again. The urge to paint was still there, you see, even though so much else had been subsumed."

I nodded, I may even have smiled, but I didn't stop moving. Not until I was back in my own room, with my weight against the closed door.

The events of my leaving were much the same as those of my arrival, acted out in reverse. Maynes and I carried my cases out to the buggy, we shook hands, and I climbed inside, slamming the hatch closed on Enthar. Under a sky like lead sheeting, Maynes, Eleanor, and Nicola stood and watched me drive away, and I watched them, until the winding road obscured them and the castle from my view. Then I was alone, riding in the glass dome of the buggy through a landscape too familiar now to distract me, alone with my thoughts.

I've been alone with them ever since. I can't share them with anyone, and I can't lay them to rest. You can't share nightmares. I learned that a long time ago.

All you can do is try not to think too much. I've learned to become quite good at that. And when I do think, when I can't stop myself, I think a lot about Maynes. I can still picture in my mind's eye my last sight of him, standing on the gravel drive as the buggy bore me away. Eleanor on one side of him, Nicola on the other. He looked so blind. □

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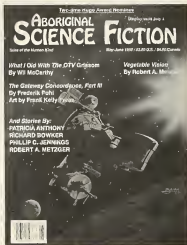


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Deepcity Midnights

By Robert Hodge

Art by David LeClerc

PART 1: SHADOWING JESUS

— where Marcus Junius Brutus learns of the man who refuses to die

The man is a walking corpse.

That's what Marco was thinking, hunkered down at the foot of a ruined building, surrounded by shadow and crumbling ferroconcrete.

Dead Man was across the street, a hazy shape shrouded in a duster of smoky plaid, ghostly in the midnight gloom.

His walk is what had first caught Marco's eye; funny kind of movement you wouldn't expect in Zero Income at night. Too relaxed — not like Mad Dog Juju's relaxed, like he was just completely in control — but an ignorant kind of relaxed.

He drifted past the graffiti-sprawled walls, oblivious to the names of Uzi's Boyz in matte-black, and the blood-red and death-blue paintslashing of the MidEvils, as Marco sucked air through his clenched teeth, thinking, *You're meat! Eyegougers gonna get your meat.*

And Dead Man, as if striving for just that, puckered up his lips and whistled. Some old tune, shrilling in the empty places, echoing. Marco sneered. *Dead meat!*

Flapjack had asked him to keep an eye on this part of Zero Income. "Just look for anything unusual," he'd said. Dead Man was the only thing he'd seen.

Hopping off the curb, splash into a puddle, Dead Man's boot sent a pebble clattering into the yawning alley entrance.

Wish Flapjack was here. Marco bit a jagged fingernail, eyeing the boots. Dead Man was a little shorter than him, maybe five foot eight, but Marco was pretty sure the boots would fit.

A lightning flash, and a steely, prehensile rope whipped out of the alley and snapped around Dead Man's neck, yanked him into darkness.

Muted shuffling, quick, and the twinkle of knifeplay.

Marco watched, waiting for the patter of receding footsteps, dark shapes retreating. Then waited some more.

The street remained silent, the brief violence swallowed into the sluggish symphony of Deepcity midnight, forgotten.

He was dead, of course. Stripped, nothing left at

all. Clothes and boots, eyes and teeth. All gone. Meat for the dark markets and body shops of Biz District.

He nudged Dead Man with his dirty canvas shoe, longing for the boots. *Wish I'd had Flapjack here.* Stealing a last look at Dead Man, he slipped out toward the neon-wash of Biz District, shadow-to-shadow silent.

And he didn't give Dead Man another thought until he saw him again three nights later.

Leaning against cold stucco, Marco watched Flapjack slick back dark-oiled hair and move on a white-haired woman named Lilith, smiling, teeth gleaming reddish in the steamy light of the Pitstop's marquee. Flapjack always seemed to go for that kind of chick — leather lingerie, and hair in peroxide shock.

A lot of people doin' town tonight, he mused, watching swaggering shapes on the sidewalks, dark shapes skulking beyond hazy firelight, solitary shapes lingering on streetcorners and in crimson-lit doorways.

Wonder where they all come from?

Marco glanced at a hover drifting silently down the boulevard, its narrow viewshields reflecting the bright lights of Biz District, and that's when he caught sight of Dead Man, stepping out of the unmarked entrance to a clinic across the street.

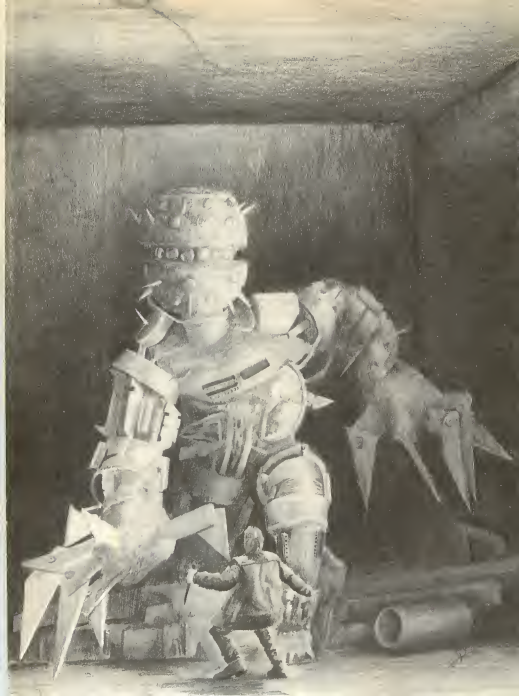
Can't be ... Marco squinted, staring.

Dead Man walked out of the meathouse and started down the street toward the ganglands of Zero Income. He seemed a little more cautious this time — he kept looking over his shoulder, peeping into the shadows.

Flapjack was gone already, tucked away in some dark corner of the Pitstop, sipping sweet red wine with Lilith, but Marco decided to follow Dead Man anyway. Abandoning his nook beneath the Pitstop's marquee, he slipped into the sidewalk traffic.

Dead Man walked quickly, buried deep in a gray overcoat, hands clutched to breast, and Marco couldn't help but wonder at him. *How could he be alive? Three days is too short to reconstruct anyone. Gotta have some kinda wealth or power to get reconstructed that quick.*

Slipping into a narrow alley, Dead Man vanished in the dense gloom, and Marco hurried forward. He



could hear Dead Man shuffling fifteen, twenty feet away.

Peeked around the corner, and Dead Man was a fading ghost. Marco slinked into the thin, black alley.

Marco followed Dead Man beyond even the far reaches of the ganglands into Boneyards — he hadn't been so far out in years.

Boneyards was blasted and abandoned, the black, crumbling facades conjuring images of crazed machinery and traps placed by long-vanished hands.

Not even any writing on the walls.

And Dead Man led him still further into the outer ruins of Deepcity —

creeping among broken rings of stone, skeletal remains of once-mighty buildings —

across a canal of gray stone, dry and dusty, empty except for a razor trickle of boiling blood —

deep into a forest of rusty pillars and jumbled masonry, echoing with tormented, siren-cries —

Marco ducked behind a twisted mass of steel as Dead Man paused before a sagging building to glance up and down the street, but Marco was down, out of sight — buried in shadow. Dead Man sidled up to the building and stepped through its open doorway.

Marco hurried forward, pressed himself against the cold stone, listening.

Nothing.

He yanked a shank from his jacket pocket, a homemade job with a fiberglass blade, and lunged through the doorway.

Footsteps, faint, somewhere overhead.

Marco quickly found an ancient escalator, now motionless, and took the steps two at a time, biting his lip, concentrating on treading softly.

A strange music drifted from above, a chanting. *Dead Man singing?* But it was the same words over and over:

"the lord is my shepherd ... the lord is my shepherd ..."

Marco neared the top of the escalator, creeping up on hands and knees, and peered over the edge into darkness, deeper than the perpetual night outside, and yet a pale hint of distant fires somehow leaked in.

A moment, and his eyes adjusted, revealing a sprawling room, with no escalator continuing up and no doors out. Dead Man, still chanting, approached a far corner.

Marco wondered why Dead Man had come here at all. The place was empty.

Watched him step right up to the corner as if he were going to slam into the wall, but Dead Man just walked through like the stone wasn't even there.

"Wha—" Marco leaped to his feet.

Dead Man was gone.

He gasped, stepping forward, and grinding metal echoed loudly. Marco dropped to a crouch as something big detached itself from the floor with a groan of ancient gears.

A beast towered over Marco, its steel exoskeleton bristling with barbed spikes, half-concealing its jumbled plastic and fiber-optic entrails, its bulbous head an armored mass of gleaming lenses.

Marco backed toward the escalator, cold fear creeping up his neck. He swallowed hard and realized he'd crapped his pants.

And the steel creature stomped forward, gears screaming, hydraulics hissing, one huge arm extended toward him, its razored talons opening.

Marco leaped down the stairs, clawing, scrambling over debris and out, running until he thought his chest would burst, but didn't stop 'til he was deep amid the familiar shadows of Zero Income.

Not a whisper seeped through the entombing walls of concrete.

"So what do you think?" Marco asked, waiting for a reaction to his tale of Dead Man. Flapjack half-smiled, staring thoughtfully.

Marco's only other listener was one of Flapjack's hatchets, named Skellum. Easily the ugliest man Marco knew, Skellum was busy scratching his back with a bangstick.

They were in Flapjack's place, a flat in one of Juju's Biz District tenements, and Marco had to wonder what power Flapjack had over Mad Dog that let him ride for free. But that's the way it had been for years now: Juju's building, Flapjack's apartment, Marco's home.

Not too comfortable: Flapjack would always mock, "Welfare! Just pump in water and power once in a while, and let them fend for themselves!"

After the Trenches, anything else is great. Marco shuddered, remembering —

"*Et, tu, Brute!*" A Trench Hound cackled, yanking a pitchfork from the prone body of Cassius. The Hound's skin gleamed red, his naked body displaying all the latest grafts and custom add-ons — he was all jazzed up.

Funny he only uses a pitchfork. A strange thought, washed suddenly away in a flood of pain as the times bit into his ribs. Screaming, screaming — his voice joined the shrieks and howls filling the Trenches with a constant and hideous music of agony.

And the Hound would leave him to bleed, of course. Some other prisoner would strangle him or dash his brains out for food — wouldn't matter. Death was short-lived.

How many times have I been reconstructed?

He would reawaken with another Hound, another torture — strapped down maybe, a shiny razor lifting toward his eyes.

"You, too, Brutus!"

Marco shook his head, breathing deeply. *I'm not Brutus anymore.* He peered at Flapjack, wondering why he had pulled him up into Biz District. *Who are you?*

"We should check it out," Flapjack was saying. "I think this is just the place I've been looking to hit for quite some time."

Flapjack slicked back his hair, like he always did when he was concentrating, and hunched forward. Pulled out a cigarette, tapping it against the back of his hand.

Marco stared at him — tall and rough-looking, yet smooth, refined after a manner. Flapjack always wore black, but his skin was white as bone. It almost seemed to shed light.

Flapjack met his stare. "The wall's a bolo," he said, "like the viddies in Chastity's Playpen." He placed the cigarette between his lips, lighting it with a thin, naked flame, which sprouted from one pale fingertip.

Skellum roused himself for a bout of laughter, rasping, "But widdout no chicks, yeah!" Slapped Marco on the shoulder, "Dey ain't no tits on the walls, baby! Hab!" He cackled.

Marco nodded, muttering, "Yeah, gotta be a bologram."

"And you can get us past the Guardian with that chant," Flapjack said, taking a deep hit off the cig and squinting at Marco. "But if not, well, that's why we have Skellum!"

Skellum bowed, his ugly face contorted, half-buried beneath dirty-red dreds. He twirled his bangstick like a baton. "Sad da jennet' boy that come atween me an' a wall!"

Marco grunted, ignoring the big, dumb meatman. "So, when should we hit it?"

Flapjack smiled. "Let's do a little biz, and then..." He made his hand into the shape of a gun, fired at an imaginary target between Marco's eyes.

Out in Zero Income, Flapjack found a wiry little MidEvil named Bally Bub.

"I need some hardware, Flyboy," said Flapjack. "You're running this show," Bally Bub lisped. He held up a finger, winked devilishly. "Just gimme a minute."

Took a while, but it was worth the time — he returned with two good blades and a few rounds for the bangstick.

"These gonna work?" Flapjack eyed the shells. "Loaded 'em m'self, my Prince," he laughed.

"Prime powder. *I'll* misfire before these babies do!" Flapjack checked the safety on the stick, tossed it and the spare rounds to Skellum. "Let's get some Dead Man."

Marco led them out beyond the fringes of Zero Income and deep into Boneyards, scurrying among ruins and shadows.

The building looked unchanged, dark and empty, and nothing to indicate it had been visited in years.

"That's it?" Flapjack nodded toward the open

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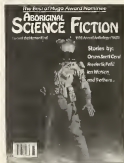
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doorway.

"Yeah."

Skellum poked his head up, grinning, "Lights out, but dey somebody home!"

They stole forward, crouched near the doorway. Slipped inside, one by one. Marco pointed out the escalator, and Flapjack stepped onto it, staring up into the gloom.

"Dark in there," Marco whispered.

Flapjack nodded, climbing up, Marco and Skellum following. Slowly, doubled over, and they finally reached the top, poking their heads over the edge and scanning the room.

Marco nodded toward the Guardian, now a jumbled heap on the floor, and Flapjack squinted, trying to make out its features.

What if this doesn't work? Marco didn't want to mess up with Flapjack around.

Flapjack gestured toward the room.

"The lord is my shepherd!" Marco's voice echoed in the huge chamber.

He stood, repeating the incantation. The Guardian remained a lifeless heap, unmoving.

He signaled the others, and the three crossed the room, Marco's voice ringing out, and one by one, they slipped through the wall.

PART 2: ALONE, WITH THE WHISPERING GODS

— where Marcus Junius Brutus discovers Light in the Deepcity

"Paradise, yeah?" Skellum grinned a wide, toothy grin.

They had passed through the wall and onto a dark, covered bridge which brought them across a chasm to another, larger, building. Up stairs and down dim corridors, and into light.

Now: the huge room before them housed a warm and well-lit garden filled with dense vegetation and small trees, all sprouting from massive clumps of vermiculite.

Marco had never dreamed of such a garden. He spotted several spidery machines tending the flora, pointed, "Look!"

But Flapjack waved him into silence. His eyes were fixed on an archway of white stone in the far wall, and he nodded, smiling. Flapjack stepped forward, striding with the confident gait of someone who knows where he is, and Marco followed.

Skellum behind, swaggering, bangstick tossed onto one shoulder. He pulled a fruit from a low branch and buried his slobbery mouth into it.

Beyond the white arch, the corridor branched and twisted, forked, curved, split. Flapjack walked unswerving, and Marco began to wonder if perhaps Flapjack had been here before.

And they found Dead Man.

Around a corner, they almost collided, but before Marco could even startle, Dead Man was down, curled up tight.

Flapjack yanked his blade free and continued forward, Skellum hurried by, teeth bared.

But Marco lingered, staring at Dead Man, dead again. Gazed at the dark stain spreading from his chest, at the yellow pool spreading from beneath his body, at his open eyes, cold and glazed and distant.

Who are you?

And that's when Skellum shouted, and Marco heard the bangstick cracking down onto bone, again and again.

They were standing over the body when Marco ran up.

Skellum was dancing around, laughing something unintelligible, and Flapjack slid a hand through slick hair.

Another Dead Man lay at their feet.

"How many more you think we'll find?" Flapjack half-smiled.

"Don't matter!" Skellum clapped Marco's shoulder. "Don't matter, yeah! We jus' keep on skillin'em!"

"So he was never reconstructed," said Flapjack.

What is this place? Marco wondered. "Should we go on? I mean, do you think we're gonna find anything here?"

Skellum rumbled, "Won't know 'less we find, yeah?"

Flapjack just frowned, brows furrowed, and that was answer enough.

Leave this place.
The walls had been whispering for some time now, warning, pleading, demanding.

But Flapjack ignored the command, as he had all the previous ones, and the three continued down the corridors. Still Marco's curiosity wrestled with his dread of the unknown.

"Where are we goin'?" he ventured.

Flapjack paused in the intersection of four featureless passages. His eyes were devoid of all but determination. "Maybe we're gonna find the voices."

Why? Marco wondered, but decided not to voice the thought. *Better not ask so many questions.*

He just followed along, several feet behind Flapjack as they plunged into yet another tunnel.

And another.

And a room that stank of grease and old metal, full of jumbled cables and unidentifiable scraps of machinery.

And a chamber containing vats of viscous soup upon which grew wrinkly sheets of Dead Man skin.

And a musty cellar with piles of empty boxes.

And a freezing closet filled with eyeballs suspended in jars of clear gelatin.

And into a silvery corridor, its mirror walls still

whispering.

Leave this place. Leave NOW! hissed the walls, and Marco was beginning to like the thought.

But Skellum just laughed, and Flapjack kept walking, and that's about when they were hit — Marco really couldn't be certain — as the walls flashed, vanishing, the Dead Men leaping out, and everything was a whirl of shapes and colors, spinning and plunging into darkness.

He drifted up out of the dark depths into — voices.

"Wake up," one voice echoed, warm and fuzzy in the back of his skull.

But other voices swelled, surged in his head, and the dark dissolved into broken, staccato images, disjointed scenes.

Mirror walls evaporating

Faces

Dozens of faces, all the same

Dead Man

Flapjack moving, a blur

Screams

Loud crash, slow and deep, the bangstick cracking a Dead Man's skull

Slower

Slower, and a great weight pulling him down, and knowing that they had him

A blade, flashing, burying into a throat inches from his left shoulder

His own hand and arm, connected to the blade

Still: down, down

Flapjack turning, eyes meeting his, starting toward him

Fading, fading

"Wake up."

Flapjack's face hovered over his, upside down. "You awake?"

Marco started, head spinning, glancing about. "Wh—"

Flapjack clapped a hand over his mouth, silencing him.

They were in a dim corner of a small, low-ceilinged room, surrounded by rubbish heaps and the stench of old decay. And Marco became aware of other noises, distant voices.

Flapjack whispered, "Lost Skellum — he ran away, and I don't know what happened to him — but I got this." Held up the bangstick. "Still loaded."

He gazed across the room, toward the nearing voices. "One shot, and I'm gonna use it."

Marco didn't want to even think about another fight. The tender knot on his head was an unsavory reminder of his embarrassing performance in the last one.

Flapjack signaled him to stay put and crept away, slipping between trash heaps, disappearing.

Voices abruptly grew louder. *They're coming in!*
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Marco felt for his shank. Gone. *Okay, okay —*

Struggled to his feet, swaying unsteadily, and looked around for a stick or a bottle or a rock — anything he could use as a weapon. Found a broken ceramic jug protruding from some moldering rags, pulled it loose.

A tinkling as of small bells, and several shards spilled onto the floor.

The voices went silent.

Marco breathed a curse and shuffled around a trash pile, edged up, peered into the room. Four Dead Men were stalking forward, and beyond them he could see another figure.

Flapjack! thought Marco. But the shape came into view, and Marco saw that it was someone else. Tall, muscular, his movements deliberate yet fluid. The figure pulled a pistol from his hip and retreated toward the shadow of a garbage heap.

And Flapjack chose that exact moment to strike, his body flying at the gunman's flank, eyes burning, teeth flashing — all a momentary image, instantly vaporized in a fiery flash as the tip of the bangstick connected.

Marco hunkered down in the shadows, the adrenaline in his veins now sloughing off — his hands trembled, his head felt light.

The Dead Men carried Flapjack away, leaving the other man lying on the floor.

His skin flickered and flashed, finally vanished altogether, leaving his true form exposed. Twisted metal and grafts of flesh and ropy polyvinyl. Fiber optics and gleaming circuitry and steel armor.

A human brain in an alloy skull. White eyeballs staring out of metal sockets. Blood and silicon.

Its left arm flailed about, jerked and tremored, but its legs were completely immobile. One good arm combed its body for a moment, fingers probing, then trembled and lay still.

The walls sighed. *We are lost.*

Marco didn't see any movement in the room, and the pistol seemed to be out of the reach of the creature on the floor, so he scrambled toward the weapon.

Do not fear, whispered the walls.

Marco snatched up the gun.

The voice whispered, *We need each other.*

"Who are you?" growled Marco, glancing about the room. There was only one way out.

I am Gabriel.

Marco edged toward the doorway, pistol aimed at the dim opening. "Stay back! I'll slam anyone who comes in!"

You must listen. The Welfare is going to be terminated. There will be no more power.

"Yeah?" Marco wasn't really listening. He peered into the dark corridor.

We are constructs, said Gabriel, minds housed in

silicon. Without power, we will die.

"Sounds bad," sneered Marco.

Yes, agreed the voice in the walls, for the cyborg which would have carried us out lies on the floor beside you. There is not enough time to repair it.

Marco grunted. The corridor leaving the room looked empty.

Now, only your brain can carry us.

Took a while for the words to seep in, and then Marco laughed. "Y'know what?" he cried. "You're gonna die!" He burst into laughter again.

Without us, you too will perish.

"Without you! What could you possibly do for me? Nothin', that's what!"

We can save you! Gabriel cried. We can save each other!

"Like I said, you're gonna die!"

The walls fell silent, and Marco crept out into the labyrinth. But the corridors all looked the same, and none of the rooms seemed familiar, and after a very long time he had to wonder if he would ever escape.

Brutus.

Flapjack whispered out of the walls.

Marco stopped, shivering, suddenly feeling cold all over. He scanned the dim passage. "Where are you?"

Here. I don't know.

Marco licked his lips, swallowed hard, backed toward one wall. "Where?"

No answer.

Maybe it's not Flapjack.

Your friend is with us, whispered Gabriel. His body was ruined — even his brain was somewhat damaged — but we have salvaged his mind.

"Salvaged?" Marco remembered: the blast when Flapjack slammed the cyborg, the smell of burnt flesh; Flapjack's body twisted snakelike and smoking; the cyborg, prone, arms outstretched, a flesh and metal crucifix bleeding strange fluids.

"Flapjack?" Marco stammered.

Flapjack, whispered the walls. Yes, Flapjack. That's me. And I remember you, Brutus.

"Can't be —"

I'm alive ... in a sense ... But I'll die if you don't take me out of here.

Marco stared into the dull shine of the pistol barrel.

Gabriel whispered, *There is nothing to fear* — but Marco cut him short, shouting, "Why not use a Dead Man? Y'got enough of 'em!"

No, Flapjack hissed. *I need you.*

Marco leaned against the wall, sank slowly to the floor.

The clones are incapable of this task, sighed the walls. *If there were any other way ...*

Flapjack softly spoke: *I've always watched over you, right? What will happen when the Welfare gets*

cut?

Marco shook his head, imagining all those people with no water or power.

You think you can make it, Brutus? Alone? Flapjack paused, then: *I'll be able to watch over you if you take us with you.*

We all will, whispered Gabriel. But it seemed to Marco as if the voices were drifting away, fading. He stared off into space. *We will take you far away from here.*

And the Dead Men stepped forward, lifted him — he was too ... tired ... too tired and empty to do anything, to even care. They lifted him and carried him through the silent halls.

PART 3: BEYOND THE BLACK SKY

— where Marcus Junius Brutus escapes from Deepcity

The voices guided him through the labyrinth, and Marco noticed that they no longer whispered from the walls, but echoed in his head. His shaven scalp tingled, except for a long, numb crease behind his left ear, and another at the base of his skull. His memory, too, remained numb.

He felt his stomach clench — he had already vomited twice.

Fingers tight on the pistol.

Relax, Brutus.

Marco sneered, kept walking; up, out of the twisted corridors and into Boneyards, through black alleys far beyond, to a plain of rusty sepulchers, the empty shells of ancient machines.

And still further.

He scuttled over one low hill of iron wreckage, pausing at its summit. Glanced back over his shoulder, down beyond the forlorn gulfs toward Zero Income and Biz District and the lighted towers of the reconstruction yards bordering the Trenches, the deepest tier of the vast valley that was Deepcity.

From such a great distance, there should have been a single, nebulous glow over that whole region, but Deepcity was black. Only a few faint peeps of firelight gleamed like dying embers.

The power has been cut, Flapjack hissed, sounding amused.

Come, sighed Gabriel, *we must hurry now.*

Marco turned, picked his way forward in the dark.

Ever up and over, 'til he was certain he had been swallowed into a land of utter desolation. But the voices called to him, urged him on. So many voices in his head.

Up, you must keep walking!

Marco found he was kneeling in mud, gasping. "Too tired, too tired ..."

But he staggered up, scooping the gun out of the mud and trudging onward.

Noises echoed in the darkness now — screams and laughter and singing and wild cries. Mostly screams. Marco hurried, though his legs were leaden. He felt like he had been walking forever — all he could remember was walking, moving in the dark.

"Gotta rest." He fell against a mound of rocks, felt the cold stones press against his face.

We must hurry.

"What were you doing in Deepcity, Gabriel?"

Marco asked, hoping to buy a few precious moments of rest.

They've been helping poor souls escape, hissed Flapjack. Who do you think is in here with us, Brutus! Someone above felt guilty about all these poor, condemned souls, so they got the bright idea to steal some of the better ones out, right Gabriel? That's why I cut the Welfare.

Marco gasped. "What!"

Flapjack chuckled deep in Marco's head. *Stealing souls from me! But then you stumbled onto Dead Man and I thought, why not just end it all personally?*

"You ..." Marco faltered, fell silent, acutely aware of Flapjack's identity, and a cold blackness seeped into his veins.

Ironic, isn't it? Flapjack laughed. That they should have to save me, the Adversary, in order to convince you to save them!

Stomach churning, icy sweat creeping down his skin. Marco held the stones tight, his knees barely supporting him, and he suddenly realized that they weren't stones at all, but skulls.

Gasping, he fell to the mud, bile rising.

Flapjack chuckled deep inside, and Marco vomited, though nothing much came out. His guts heaved and his eyes went blurry, and Gabriel hissed. *Quickly!*

Even as he spoke, the sound of footsteps approached out of the darkness, crunching on the rocky soil, and a cold, grinding-stone voice descended: "Made it, yeah."

Skelum stood before him, leaning against the pile of cold, gray skulls. He twirled a blade lazily.

Marco stared up at him.

Battered, bloodied — black welts covered half his face, somehow making him appear even more intimidating.

The gun! Flapjack hissed, and Marco fumbled for it, found it beneath his leg. Closed his fingers around the grip.

Skelum leered. "An' where de Flapjack?"

Marco shrugged.

"Didn't think he make it —"

Kill him! hissed Flapjack.

"— an' now it jus' me ... an' ... you!" Pointed his blade at Marco, stepped forward.

Kill him before he kills us!

Deepcity Midnights

Marco aimed the pistol at his chest. "I never liked you, Skellum, so just keep comin' closer if you wanna get alammed."

"Sexy piece!" Big, stupid grin. His devil eyes twinkling.

Marco pumped the trigger, not really aiming, just firing into his midst. Opened his eyes when the hammer clicked on nothing.

Skelum lay sprawled on the mound, half-buried in pale skulls. Three dark patches stained his grimy shirt.

"I be wit' you 'gain, jennet' boy!" he gasped, pink froth bubbling just beyond his lips. "Flapjack gone, an' ... m'new friends be ... takin' over ..."

He tensed up for a moment, sending skulls clattering, and then went limp, sank slowly to the base of the mound. Marco breathed heavily, clenching his jaw tight, but deep inside, Flapjack chuckled.

The nightmare lands rolled by, empty, unremembered.

Marco kept walking, forever it seemed. Up, to a vast wall spanning from horizon to horizon, and through a mighty archway, its impenetrable gate now hanging half-open.

The edge of Deepcity, Flapjack whispered.

Marco did not look back. He plunged forward into a gloom of gray mists. Up steps of crumbling stone, he climbed, and nothing was visible above or below, only the cold steps beneath his feet.

And still he climbed, a lifetime and more, to a door in the sky. He threw it open and light spilled in.

Heart leaping — *sunlight!* — it had been so long. He climbed up into light forest shadows, beneath a glowing dawn.

The sun splashed his face, a breeze caressed his brow. He smelled the cool, heavy forest scents.

How I have missed you these hundreds of years!

Marco laughed, wiping tears from his eyes.

There is still much climbing, Brutus, said Gabriel, deep within his head. Heaven is far away, and you must carry us there if you would be redeemed.

But Marco gazed out across the rolling hills, aglow with dawnfire, and knew he couldn't leave just yet.

"No," he sighed. "It is to my home we go!"

And the Angel fell silent, knowing he was trapped in Marco's body, with the others, the souls he had saved from Deepcity; even Dead Man was in there somewhere, curiously enough.

And Marco's head was filled with Flapjack's laughter as he danced out of the woods and down a hillside toward a small village of cobblestone streets and olive groves, glowing hearths and the scent of polenta. □

Sturm Clusters

By John Farrell
Art by Courtney Skinner

I think he's disintegrating." Sturm frowned at the word but Flannery had a habit of choosing metaphysical terms that Sturm thought inappropriate — especially for a clinician — and he said so.

"Do you want to see him or not?" said Flannery.

Sturm let the phone slide onto his shoulder as he looked out his office window, admiring the contrast of the blue sky with the green pine trees along the boulevard. Finally he said, "Thanks, Jack, I'll see him."

"Good. I'm just glad I could catch you Not on the road these days?"

"Nope. I'll be in most of the day." Sturm picked up a pen and began to draw borders on the card in his Rolodex that said Pickering, Marylou. "Tell me more about this guy."

"He's a physicist, works as a consultant at Brownlow. Came in to see me a few times, complaining about his dreams."

"Uhuh."

"They're pretty abstract, and you've got more background in hard science than I do."

Sturm smiled. "That's cute, Jack. What's his problem? Substance abuse?"

Flannery laughed. "I said physicist, not pharmacist. He got his Ph.D. from Princeton. I thought of you because I can't help the guy and I don't want to kiss him off with Assured Health Associates."

"Okay, I'll see him. Give him my number — this afternoon — if it's that urgent to him."

"I think it is. He's a bit over-serious, but I'll let you be the judge."

"Thanks. Get a release of information. Peggy will give you the fax number. What's his name?"

"James Cullovey."

Cullovey stopped when he found the stream clearing the timber line. The tall birches had disappeared; only stubby fir trees surrounded him, and he sat on a stone where the water puddled.

He had no idea how long he'd been climbing. Through the treetops the sky looked dark, a rich cerulean blue he'd never before seen at this time of day. He glimpsed a star between the swaying branches overhead.

He scooped some water in the palm of his hand. It didn't feel cold or warm; tasteless too, as he swallowed some. He slid off the stone and continued his climb.

Despite the blue sky he soon noticed more stars, an unusual patch in particular. But for the obscur-

ing sunlight in the west (was it west?), it looked like a globular cluster.

He sat down again, fascinated, and tried to concentrate on the glowing orb until he woke.

That's it?"

James Cullovey nodded and took another sip of his water. "Yes."

"This is recurring now?"

Cullovey shifted, not a heavy man, but he didn't exercise and slouched in his chair. His hair thinned above the forehead and he had dirt under his fingernails; an unconscious observation as far as Sturm was concerned, but he hated to think what the guy's bathroom looked like. "No, it's not recurring, not really. I mean, I seem to get a little farther every night."

Sturm looked at his notes. "You were married once?"

Cullovey smiled, "My girlfriend just left me. But I was married until five years ago."

"For how long?"

"Nine years — and before you ask me — no I didn't leave my wife for Eleanor. I met her two years after my divorce. We lived together for a year."

Sturm nodded patiently, but put a hand over his mouth to conceal his grin, thinking she probably left because of the goddamned bathroom. What he said was, "Have you been feeling anxiety since she left?"

"Women don't make me anxious, Dr. Sturm."

Sturm put his pen down. "Why do these dreams bother you?"

Cullovey looked at the wall. "They bother me because I've never been a dreamer until now. And I've never had dreams of this clarity."

"How so?"

"I remember things. The rocks, the trees, and the water. It's very complete. You know, a dream isn't usually like that. These dreams are very continuous, if that's the right word."

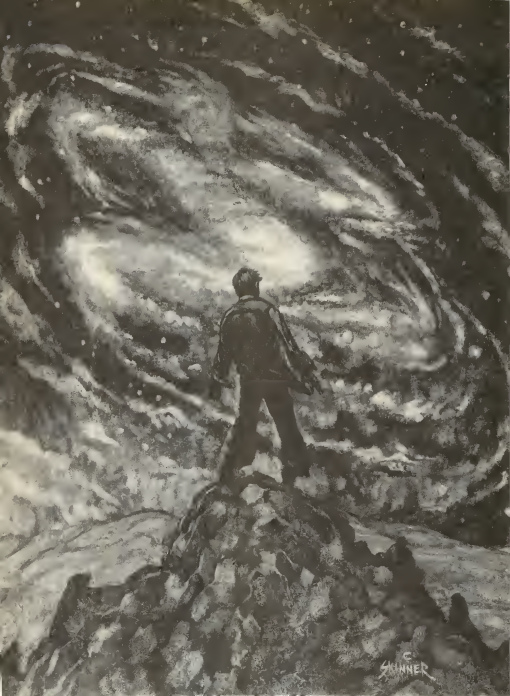
Sturm nodded. "Reality consistent."

"Yes, and that's odd."

"Perhaps. What adjustments have you gone through since Eleanor left? How has your life changed?"

Cullovey looked into his cup of water. "It hasn't much. I've just gotten older. What are you thinking?"

"It's possible recent changes in your life at home or at work have affected you so your sleeping pat-



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tern is changing."

"Well ..."

"It doesn't necessarily mean there's something wrong. You may be seeing what your dreams will be like for the near future. Has it affected your work at Brownlow?"

"No more than anything else."

Sturm shuffled his notes on the desk. "Mr. Cullovey, I'd like you to come in again."

Cullovey seemed nonplused for a moment. "Oh sure. Is our time up already?"

Sturm got up from his desk. "Only for today. I need a few more details, and at the risk of being an annoyance, I'd like you to take a pocket tape recorder, and start retelling your dreams as soon as you wake up."

Cullovey rose and placed his half-empty cup on the bookcase. "Ah. I don't have them every night."

"I realize that. Whatever you dream, whether it's related to this recurring sequence or not, I want you to describe for me."

"All right."

"Can you come in next Monday afternoon?"

Cullovey nodded. "I can come at four."

"Good. Any other files you might have, medical or work-related, would be helpful."

Cullovey shrugged, and put his hands in his pockets.

Sturm took him to the door, and as he held it open said, "There's just one more thing, Mr. Cullovey. Are you a physicist, or an astronomer?"

"I'm a physicist. I worked in theory, but for a while I was thinking about astrophysics."

"Where did you work before Brownlow?"

Cullovey seemed to hesitate for just a moment. "I was a researcher at Kendrick University in Springfield. It didn't pay very much though. Why do you ask?"

"It's no surprise you should notice something like a globular cluster, is it?"

Cullovey looked at Sturm closely. "It's not a surprise at all. In fact, I recognized it at once."

Sturm said, "You recognized what?"

"The cluster. It was NGC 6624."

Marylou arrived that evening as Sturm sat by his bed, drinking a glass of wine and flipping through pages of his college astronomy texts.

"You're not going back to school again, are you?" With a graceful swing of her leg, she closed the door behind her and put her briefcase on the dining room table. Sturm had known her for six months and he had yet to see her twice in the same outfit. She was wearing a red blazer over her navy blue skirt and blouse.

"No. Just getting reacquainted with some college stuff, although I suppose it's outdated now."

Marylou pushed the hair out of her eyes, and took a deep breath. "Let's have a drink already."

"Are you planning to stay the night?"

She stopped short with one of Sturm's favorite expressions. Whenever Marylou was surprised by something, she instinctively drew herself up to full height, almost six feet, with shoulders back as though a drill sergeant had yelled at her. She pursed her lips and smiled at him. "Uh-oh. I was but —"

Sturm closed his textbook, and climbed out of the lounge. "I didn't mean to give you the impression you were unexpected. Sit down and let me make you something."

She watched him go to the refrigerator. "What happened today?" she said quietly.

"New client. Is this salad day?"

She didn't say anything until he finished loading his arms with lettuce, half an onion, the leeks and carrot shavings, and shouldered the door closed. Then she kissed him. "Yes, this is salad day. Tell me."

Sturm moved carefully to the counter. "Mr. Cullovey has dreams that bother him, and they're interesting because — if he's being accurate, and I have no reason to doubt it — they're uniquely linear."

"What does that mean? All you've got is Thousand Islands."

"Thousand is fine." Sturm turned to the cupboard for the salad bowls. "It means they're not strictly recurring, or discontinuous like most dreams. From what he's told me so far, his dreams are recurring in only one respect: they're in the same location. That in itself is remarkable. But his observations, for instance of the stars, are completely literal. He's not drawing any obvious analogies, either sexual or familial."

Marylou watched him roll up his sleeves and wash his hands like a surgeon before he did anything to the vegetables. She took off her jacket, draped it over the kitchen chair, and looked at one of the books.

She said, "What's N.G.C. stand for?"

"New General Catalogue. The so-called new list of stars and galaxies that Dreyer charted in the eighteen eighties. Up to that time, astronomers operated on a list put together by a Frenchman named Messier."

She grinned. "Any relation to the Rangers' forward?"

He looked over his shoulder at her, his face a blank. Marylou started to laugh, and Sturm's neatly trimmed beard began to stretch as he smiled back.

"Is this about ice hockey again?"

"No, it's about stars. Your stars. Not mine. I'm from Canada."

Sturm finished making the salad and as they ate dinner, he told her about the cluster that Cullovey saw in his dream, all the while realizing something else he had to think about for the first time in his life: how and when to ask Marylou to marry him.

She followed him.

Culloyey couldn't remember how long he'd watched the sky. The hills descended from him in all directions, the tiny treetops running all the way to the horizon where the clouds fought to obscure the coming light.

He remembered the night before, and tried to find the star cluster again. Though the sky seemed darker, he couldn't see as many stars. How odd, he thought to himself. There should have been more stars in a darker sky.

She said it was a different place.

What do you mean, he wanted to say, but he held his tongue because she seemed to know what he was thinking.

She said they were sitting on a planet near the Crab Pulsar that went nova in 1054. Some Indians had seen the explosion from Central America, and some Chinese astrologers on the other side of the world (who were promptly executed for failing to predict its occurrence).

I already knew that, Culloyey thought and wondered how they could breathe air on this placid world, as if what she said could be true. It seemed difficult to explain why any planet in the neighborhood of a neutron star should not look like a cinder, but she didn't look like she cared to explain much of it anyway. So he asked the woman who she was, and how she knew where they were.

She felt warm now, and close beside him. At first he thought it was his former wife, but her hair never looked so dark.

"Oh, I'm not her," she said suddenly, and the clearness of her voice startled him.

A sharp wind seemed to rise even as his own voice rose within his mind. He looked at the clouds over the far horizon, and said he'd never seen the sunrise on a mountaintop.

She started to laugh, and said it wasn't a sunrise at all. "And those aren't clouds over the horizon. There are no clouds on this planet, not the kind you're thinking of."

With great effort, Culloyey sat up. Peering closely at the lower sky, he realized she was right. The sun would not rise. What shape had already risen, as long as he'd been watching, assumed the wide disk of an elliptical galaxy, its huge spiral arms which he'd mistaken for clouds, reaching from one end of the horizon to the other.

The woman continued to laugh, though she wouldn't let him see her face.

"What happened to 6624?" he said. "I saw it here last night."

She stopped laughing long enough to say, "We're in it."

After vainly trying to make out the details on her shadowed face, he tried to sound authoritative. "This is Sagittarius? You said we were in the Crab."

"This crab, that crab, what difference does it

make?" Her laughing didn't stop.

He looked up and noticed another star cluster coming into view. "But the Crab's in Taurus. We must be outside the galaxy altogether, millions of light years away."

She relaxed finally. "What a charge you are," she said. "What a charge."

Culloyey sat up in bed at 3:14 am. He took off this drenched T-shirt and went to the bathroom for a glass of water. It tasted unpleasantly warm, and when he opened the refrigerator, he found nothing but beer and iced tea.

He pulled on his slacks, a sweater, and his jacket, stepped into a pair of loafers, and went out to his car. He saw no stars above, only a vague grayness tinged with the yellow light from the city.

Culloyey drove down Hohart Street, and pulled into the parking lot of the Super Stop & Shop. Already he could see two clerks at the last registers still open, eleven and twelve. He picked up some Ocean Spray Cranberry Juice, and went to the woman running the cash register at twelve. He had seen her before on some of his stops and found her attractive. She looked slight, with a short haircut, maybe twenty years old. Culloyey found her breasts distracting under a pink knit sweater. Her hands felt warm as she returned his change. But she didn't notice his attention, nor did she return his smile. She looked bored.

When Culloyey got in the door he remembered the tape recorder. He drew the quart of juice from the grocery bag, went into the bedroom and sat by the desk as he recounted his dream. Then he drank half the container and fell back on his bed.

Sturm didn't hear from Culloyey for two weeks. Although curious, he did not make contact with clients who failed to call after a single visit. Sturm would only call someone if they'd been to see him at least two or three times.

He thought of breaking this rule; however, Culloyey called and set up another appointment.

They walked around the office park and Culloyey sat at a bench on the hill overlooking Route 128.

"I've had four dreams since I saw you last. Here's the tape. In each dream I was on an empty world, looking up at skies of varying brilliance. But it doesn't seem possible, does it?"

"Why do you say that?"

"There are trees, but no birds. Grass, but no hogs. It was all beautiful, but too familiar, and empty — like a museum display. I couldn't recognize any constellations. Out of the immediate galaxy, obviously, they would be different."

Sturm smiled. "Well, it's not exactly obvious to me, but thanks for assuming I know more than I

actually do."

"Look, the thing is, I watched for a long time, and I did finally spot something familiar. M-31, the Andromeda Galaxy. It was closer in my dreams than it actually looks from the best telescopes we have. But there's nothing between us and Andromeda. Just void."

He paused for so long, Sturm started to shut off his own tape recorder. "What's bothering me now is, I'm being followed."

"By whom?"

Cullovay shrugged. "I can't see her clearly. That's what drives me up the wall. Everything is so clear in these dreams, but the girl, this woman, is like a wraith."

Sturm said, "What do you feel toward her?"

Cullovay frowned, as though the question surprised him. "Oh, curiosity."

"No sexual attraction?"

"Well, yes, a strong one. I think I wanted to rape her."

"Why is that?"

Cullovay smiled now, but not enough to show any teeth. "I usually feel like that about the women in my dreams."

Sturm nodded slowly, displaying none of his growing concern, although he didn't like that smile. "Mr. Cullovay," he began.

"Now look, I realize we can go off on that tangent, but I want to complete my thoughts first about these environments. They're all the same, just like here, like Earth. It's ridiculous."

Sturm folded his hands together. "I'd think so, too. Assuming random evolution is true, there's no reason to think other worlds would be even remotely like our own."

Cullovay rubbed his unshaven face. "Fewer and fewer physicists assume that evolution was ever truly random. That's what makes these dreams more ironic."

"I wasn't aware of that. But even so, what else does the human imagination have to go on? None of us has been to another star, another planet. All the ones nearby are cold dark stones. Naturally, if you try to envision another world, it will appear to be like ours."

Cullovay fell silent. "I know," he said at last. "That's when I know I'm dreaming. But when I look at the stars in my dreams, the clusters, they're all right where they would be if I were watching them from that place out there. You see what I'm saying? The clarity of the locale plays both ways. How can I doubt these dreams when I actually have an idea of where I am?"

"That's true, but the woman following you —"

Cullovay's eyes narrowed in anger. "I've been thinking of that too," he said. "What if it's not a woman? What if it just seems that way because they don't want me to know what they look like?"

Sturm had enough experience never to ask dumb questions of his patients, especially when he was recording his sessions. Instead of saying, who are they, he said, "Specify."

Cullovay sighed. "What if these aren't dreams at all, but messages ... sent from out there?"

Marylou's curiosity irritated him. Sturm took her to dinner at the Four Seasons after work, and they sat by the window overlooking Providence Street. After his session with Cullovay, the last thing he wanted to talk about was a client, and Marylou's persistent questions were blocking his concentration.

"It changes the whole picture then," she said as the waiter took their menus and ordered the wine steward to pour the sauvignon blanc.

Sturm smirked. "It just means he's more preoccupied with women than with stars. And it's too bad. The stars I found interesting. He's clearly suffering some mental fatigue —"

"What will you do? Prescribe something?"

Sturm gave her a wearied look.

Marylou smiled. "I'm a social worker. I can't prescribe anything. I'm jealous."

"Well, there's not much point, seeing as he has no trouble getting to sleep. Pills won't control what you dream."

"That's not true. If you give him something strong, you could knock him out."

Sturm nodded. "And make him virtually unfit for work. At least in his present condition he's still functional. But as I was saying, there's more than fatigue here. I called Brownlow and discovered that Mr. Cullovay has had some personal problems — with women."

"How did you find that out?"

"I pretended there was some information missing from his file, which turned out to be true. I had a feeling he had left something out when the stuff first came over for his first visit. So I called. It didn't take much prodding, and as usual, personnel directors let on more than they think, especially if you catch them right after lunch."

Marylou grinned and shook her head.

"I'd also like to know what problems he might have had at Kendrick University, his previous position. But that information will take much more than a phone call. I want to see where his dreams keep going in the meantime."

"Where do you think they'll go?"

Sturm spread his napkin carefully over his lap. "Eventually to a question mark. He can't keep deceiving himself that he's actually seeing reality. He's already become stressed to the point of believing they may be messages from outer space. Sooner or later he'll reach a limit."

"Could that take a long time?"

He smiled. "It's possible. He's certainly shown a

remarkable capacity for detail, even though the dreams are told from memory into a tape recorder. Those tapes alone suggest his subconscious could have enormous resources for his imaginative wanderings. The one he gave me today is a good example. In fact, I was thinking about it on the way over here."

"Oh." She said this with exaggerated disappointment, and smiled appreciatively when he sighed.

"As I was saying, he remembers most details quite vividly. For instance, the conversations with this mysterious woman who follows him about — baunts him more like — and laughs at his attempts to discover her identity, saying, quote: what a charge you are, what a charge."

Marylou shrugged. "I guess she gets a charge out of him."

"That's what I thought, but when I pressed him on the words, he insisted they were exactly as he said. And that indicates a preoccupation with detail, if nothing else."

"Then you can expect his dreams to get more detailed, I should imagine."

"Maybe. Maybe not. I think sooner or later he'll reach the limits of his imagination, conscious or unconscious, no matter how big the universe is."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Then I'm going to win a Nobel Prize."

"Don't say that."

Sturm looked up from his lap and raised his eyebrows. "I just meant the case is curious. It's the kind of thing that could draw a lot of attention."

Marylou was starting to smile now. "I hope it doesn't. You'll become famous and move away."

"What if I did?" he said abruptly.

Now Marylou looked at her lap, and again she stiffened her shoulders and folded her hands over the table. "Would we still be friends?"

"Friends?"

She looked away at one of the waiters. "If you got an offer, like that one at Stanford — something that took you out to the west coast or down south — would we still be friends?"

He shook his head slowly. "If you and I were married, we would always be friends."

Marylou held his gaze, a slight parting of her lips the only sign his statement had taken her by surprise. "I thought you never wanted to get married." Her voice cracked over the last word.

Sturm reached into his pocket for the ring that had belonged to his mother, assuming even more of a clinical demeanor. "I never said that, Marylou. You were the one who said it, and I kept silent. You never pressed me on it." He put the small box on the table before her. "I've wanted to marry you since that night at the Hynes. Remember Greeley grabbed us for his survey on the effects of gender in highway traffic patterns? The question is whether you want to marry me."

"Yes," she said. When she held the ring up, a small diamond set in its center sparkled. She slipped the ring on her finger and closed the palm of her right hand, as though it were a secret. She reached across the table and took his hand, a smile on her face prompting his own.

"You know," she said. "These planet stories gave me an idea."

"I beg your pardon?"

"A way of testing his theory."

Sturm frowned. "Whose theory?"

"Cullovay's. You said he thinks his dreams are coming from outer space."

Sturm glanced at an elderly couple being seated at the table nearby. "Marylou, this case, like all my others, is confidential. The only reason I tell you is because we're close. But for God's sake, I don't want you to get involved."

"I'm just saying there's a way to test his theory."

He started to say absolutely not. But the way she cocked her head and peered at him out of the corner of her eyes told him she was serious.

"All right, what is it?" he said.

"Monitor his dreams."

Sturm sat back. "Come on. I've done that for more reason and gotten little information."

She said, "I'm not talking about an electroencephalogram. I'm talking about something more detailed. My brother-in-law has been testing a new portable P.E.T. scanner. You could take it right to Cullovay's bedroom. No lab. No disorientation. Pump him with fluorine-18, and you record the brain activity during his dreams."

Sturm gaped. "Marylou, are you out of your mind? I've got to have a medical reason — and even then I'd have trouble getting clearance."

"Who says you don't have a medical reason? You said his dreams were unique."

"Yes, and they're still dreams, not seizures. General Electric didn't produce positron emission tomography for the local video dealer."

"So why are they coming out with a portable version?"

Sturm held his breath for five seconds. Sometimes he just couldn't handle the woman.

Marylou smiled. "Darling, my brother-in-law's testing it. He's a qualified engineer, fifteen years working for G.E. I wouldn't suggest it if he didn't let me know. Timothy's always asking me for guinea pigs. Ask Cullovay to sign a waiver. I bet you he'll do it."

"P.E.T. Jesus, we'd light up his brain like a candeli-er."

"If his dreams are truly different, you'll see it."

"Well, why stop there? Why not drag him into Mass General and subject him to a fast M.R.I.? They can take an image per second."

"You can't bring him into a clinical setting and expect reliable results. He'll only dream when he's

at home. That's why I suggested the portable."

Sturm sat back and took another sip of his wine. "I came here to ask you to marry me. Now I've got to ask a depressed client if I can pump him full of radioactive fluorine-18 and make a recording of his brain while he sleeps. What does Cullovey get out of this?"

Marylou held up her glass to toast, the ring on her finger clinking against it. "Tell him he can keep the video."

Sturm sat with Cullovey in his living room, watching him swallow a glass of wine and listening to Timothy Denton, G.E. field engineer, pacing about the bedroom upstairs in his heavy L.L. Bean mountain boots as he prepared the scanner.

"I'll stay here," Sturm said to Cullovey. "Denton is five minutes away if there's any problem. But I wouldn't worry about it. I'm familiar with the clinical version of the P.E.T. This will be painless."

"Can you read the scanner, or do I have to pay for another doctor?" Cullovey poured himself another glass.

Sturm nodded. "I can read it. I'm anticipating sleep spindles, but we should also see other areas of concentration."

Cullovey smiled ruefully. "You mean if I'm making it all up."

"In effect, if your unconscious is making it up."

"I didn't realize the unconscious actually had a neurophysical signature. I just thought it was a metaphor for things psychologists groped at."

Sturm smiled. "I'm a doctor as well as a psychologist, Mr. Cullovey. Metaphors can be extremely apt. Even Freud had a good one for the unconscious." He took the glass away from his patient. "That's enough."

Cullovey looked morose. "I never slept with my mother, Doctor Sturm. I never even wanted to. She died when I was two."

Cullovey went to sleep an hour later. Sturm sat in an armchair in the living room, and could hear his patient's steady breathing as he fell into deeper sleep. The scanner hummed quietly by the bedside. Denton had connected it to a Macintosh Quadra outside in the hall but Sturm felt no desire to watch for the next few hours. Cullovey wouldn't be deeply into his dreams until well after midnight.

At 3:14 Sturm started from a doze. Cullovey called from his bedroom and Sturm stumbled up the stairs to prevent him from knocking over the equipment.

Cullovey had wrestled his way into the closet, the black brace and electrodes still fastened to his head.

"What happened?" said Sturm.

"I know where she's from. Get out of the way. I'll be right back."

"Cullovey, snap out of it. You're still wearing the brace —"

Cullovey pressed one of his heavy hands against Sturm's chest and the psychiatrist fell over, caught by surprise. Cullovey tore the brace off, and dropped it on the bed. He grabbed some loafers along with a jacket and charged down the stairs with "I'll be right back!" trailing behind him. His foot caught the five-pin cable and wrenched the computer off its small table.

Sturm leaped to grab it before it slid down the stairs.

He got to his car in time enough to follow Cullovey's blue Berlinetta down Hobart Street. He swerved left into the parking lot of the Stop & Shop.

When Sturm ran through the front doors Cullovey was already accosting the girl at check-out number twelve. She shrank against the cash register screaming, as two of the stewards leaped on Cullovey's back and a patron ran outside to shout for the police.

"It's all right, I just want to ask her some questions. I saw her. I saw her before!"

"Relax, buddy. Leave her alone!"

Sturm intercepted the policemen as they charged in through the exit doors. "Officer, it's not a robbery. He's a patient of mine, he's suffering trauma —"

"Just step aside, sir."

The stewards had pulled Cullovey to the floor and Sturm approached the girl by the register. She spat out a wad of chewing gum she'd almost swallowed when Cullovey grabbed her.

"Jesus, I thought he was going to rape me on the spot."

"I saw her, Doctor Sturm! She was the one I saw from the nebula, the one who was hiding from me all this time."

The cops looked at Sturm and he shook his head. "It's mistaken identity. She looks like someone he knows —"

"Where are you from?" said Cullovey, still struggling.

"I'm not telling you," she said nervously. "Bad enough my boyfriend's a creep without this guy showing up."

Sturm brought Cullovey back to his house before daylight. He felt raw and irritated. "Nice performance, Cullovey. The cops think you're a nut. I want to know what you're hiding."

"I'm not hiding anything."

"You knocked me over and damaged some expensive equipment, which is going to be hard to explain since there was never any point in using it — obviously."

"That's not true. I haven't been lying."

"I said hiding," Sturm snapped. "The failed marriage and former girlfriend were a sign, but I mean these incidents with co-workers you left out of your

files."

Cullovoy caught his breath.

"Those women and now this one. These dreams are more than you've made out."

He said, "Where's my car?"

"Your car will be fine. Tell me."

Cullovoy wrapped his jacket more tightly around his waist. "All right." He placed his hands on the dashboard for several moments while he collected his thoughts. "I told you I was a researcher at Kendrick. I was. Me and two others, working on a project in solid state. There was some grant money to be had, and we faked our results. They faked them. I went along with it, and a woman I was seeing outside the department blew the whistle on us. The hard part was, I was the one they fired. The other two weren't dismissed."

Sturm nodded. "You mean their credentials were more impressive, in spite of their offense."

Cullovoy stiffened. "Yeah. I always felt I was the bottom end of the mean. And the dreams ... when they started, seemed like my aspirations coming back to haunt me. Me and my mediocrity. I guess you could say that's what the dreams partly mean." He turned his flat face toward Sturm. "What I want to know is, when will they stop?"

Sturm went home and slept until noon. He answered the phone and sat up when he heard Timothy Denton's raspy voice.

"Did you check the images?"

"Cripes, no," said Sturm. "He was out the door so fast. I thought you were going to put them on video for me."

"I have. I didn't say anything to Cullovoy. I just scarfed up the equipment like you said, and took off. Come on downtown, you should look at these. You were right about the sleep spindles. But there was a great deal of concentration in his frontal lobe — which you'd expect from deep dreaming. He was concentrating real hard."

"So?"

"So? There were no signs of neural inhibition in the brain stem."

"Say that again."

"You heard me. When you go to sleep at night, your brain stem sends out little signals that tell your muscles to relax, basically so they won't respond to your dreams and have you walk out the window or something."

"Okay."

"So, Cullovoy's brain didn't do that. But you're a doctor. I want you to look at this scan and tell me I'm reading it right. I've never been wrong before."

Sturm rubbed his eyes. "No neural inhibition at all?"

"None. And that doesn't jibe with the activity in his frontal lobe. The guy was dreaming up a storm. He was watching something intently. No REMs. But

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the lack of neural inhibition would indicate he wasn't even asleep, like he was getting the message from outside."

Sturm climbed out of bed. "Outside? Get over here with that tape, Denton. I'll call Cullovoy."

He hung up the phone, started to get dressed and then stopped himself. Sturm returned to the phone and dialed his fiancée's number at work.

"Marylou?" he said. "Oh, Marylou? Guess what? We can't let Cullovoy keep the video."

The receptionist at Brownlow said Cullovoy had called in sick. But when Sturm phoned his house, there was no answer.

He drove straight to the little Victorian in Wollaston. Cullovoy's *Berlinetta* had been returned to the driveway. The front door was locked, and when Sturm got no answer to his repeating ringing and knocking on the door, he slipped out back and managed to force a screen on the porch.

The house was empty. Sturm knew it as soon as he climbed down from the pantry. He passed through the kitchen, climbed the stairs slowly, and as he approached Cullovoy's room caught the clicking sound of a tape recorder shutting off.

Cullovoy wasn't in the room. The small pocket recorder lay on the floor amidst his blankets. Sturm picked it up. The tape had run out and he had to rewind almost an hour's worth before he found Cullovoy's voice:

"I think Sturm is probably through with me. I can't say I blame him ... funny, in all the commotion I forgot to tell him what she said to me last night, just before I woke up. She said I was almost ready ..."

His voice ended there, and so did Sturm's case. Cullovoy never came back.

A month later Sturm woke in a cold sweat, fumbling through his books as he switched on the night light and grasped his little Webster's pocket dictionary to confirm a definition of the word charge: "a person entrusted to one's care or management." He'd always known that, but this night the words of a stranger he'd never met echoed in his mind again: "What a charge you are. What a charge." □

A Word to the New Recruits

By Pete D. Manison

Art by David Deitrick

War sucks.

When you're sitting there in the recruiter's office, it'll all sound nice and neat.

"The Kaxxitu are monsters," the stocky, broad-shouldered, broad-chinned fortyish V-marine recruiter will say. He'll show you the holos to prove it: glistening exoskeleton, twelve little black eyes, a hundred roach legs all moving at the same time.

"Goddamn," you'll say, which is just what he wants you to say, which means he's got you.

"How'd you like a shipload of those fuckers coming down in your backyard, Soldier?" He calls you soldier, even though you haven't given your geneprint to the contract yet. See how clever these bastards are?

Then he'll launch into the spiel about how they attacked us first, which is horseshit; how they blew Ganymede and a million of us away in one blow, which is pretty much true as far as it goes; and how the V-corp has built the artificial planetoid Atlantis as a training ground since nothing in the solar system remotely resembles the kind of terrain you'll be seeing when you hit Kaxxitu-space, which is dead-on straight stuff.

You'll be wavering then, thinking of the stories you'll be able to tell your grandkids, thinking about not *having* any grandkids if it turns sour. He'll spot your indecision at once. He's that good.

"Would you rather be out *there* fighting them, Soldier?" he'll ask, "or fighting them on the front porch of your own house with your wife inside nursing the baby and your neighbors decapitated on the front lawn?"

That'll stop you, 'cause what can you really say?

Then he'll give you the standard PR speech: "See the outer worlds, witness sights never before witnessed, space, stars, it's all out there waiting for you, etc., etc., etc." Don't you believe it for a second. You'll be cocooned in metal for all the good stuff, and the sights you *do* get to see will be dirty and smelly, and you'll be too busy fighting for your life to appreciate just how dirty and smelly they are.

Then he'll tell you that V-pain isn't like real pain. That's when you get up, thank him for his time, and get the hell out of there.

Still sold on the glamour aspect of it all? Let me show you how it really goes. Then decide. Just listen. That's all I ask. You listened to *him*, right? Now listen to me. Wally Gordon's the name, and no, I'm

no big lug like that recruiter with a chestful of medals and eyes that promise the stars. I'm a little guy, a V-grunt, and the stars went out of my eyes a long time ago. Listen and I'll tell you why.

XXIV-7. Little ice moon in a system twenty-five lights out from Sol. Me and the V-squad — that's twenty of us — have put down near the coordinates of yet another Kaxxitu stronghold. We see the surface for maybe ten seconds before our melters kick in and we start sinking fast. The tunnels are deep down this time, so by the time we get to 'em, we've been split up pretty bad. I see Rico Munoz and Helen O'Brien ahead of me, so the three of us link up and start scanning for enemy activity.

"Shappenin', Wally?" Rico asks.

I shrug, click to infrared, spot a couple of heat sources far down the tunnel.

"See 'em?" I ask.

Helen grunts. "Our boys. Link-up?"

I'm ranker in this tiny group, which shows you just how tiny the group is, but before I can answer, I feel the tickle of dataflow in my head.

[Negative link-up. Proceed south. Traces enemy activity there.]

The three of us turn in unison: Helen and Rico must've had the same tickle.

Armored feet crunching ice that looks like it's been melted and refrozen again. Sure sign, I think. And yep, a hundred yards farther on we make first contact.

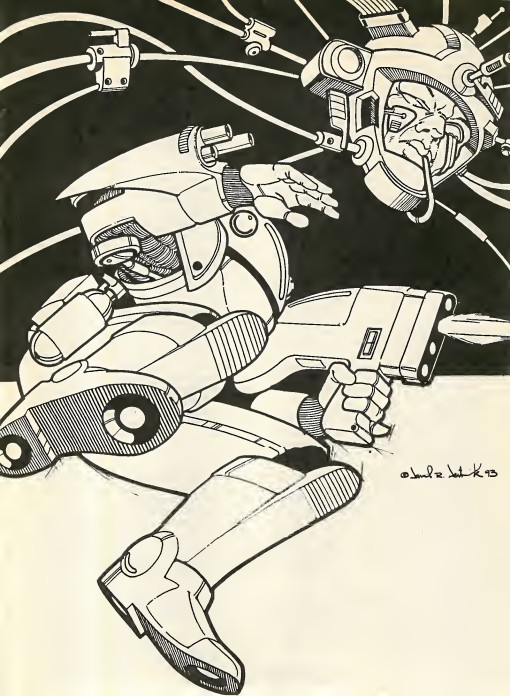
It's a guardian-drone, the kind you find around the perimeters of so-called 'strongholds.' We learned how to wax g-ds a long time ago. Helen does the honors. Roasting roach legs stretch up the place. We move on.

Pay dirt.

"Brood chambers," Helen says. I can tell by the sigh in her voice what she's thinking. We're all thinking it. Just once I'd like to hit a *military* target. But the CO says these *are* military targets, that what they're breeding are soldiers, and if we don't take 'em out here we'll be facing them — you guessed it — on our front porches with our wives nursing babies and our neighbors decapitated on the front lawn.

"Three holes," Rico says. "Three of us."

I nod, make two quick gestures, then switch from



infrared back to visispec. They keep it dark in the brood chambers, but I'll supply the light, and the heat sources are always so damned smeared out you can't get a good target lock.

Helen and Rico are moving toward their holes. I hesitate in front of mine. I've been on one too many of these baby-hunts, I guess. Maybe more than one too many. Is it true that humans used to fight wars against other humans? Hard to believe. My great-great-grandfather fought in a place called Vietnam. (Or was it my great-great-great-grandfather? He was pretty great, anyway) Vietnam. I read about it in his diaries, passed down from my father's side of the family. Country in what's now the province of Orienti South, I think, but don't quote me on that. Anyway, this is *different*, right? These things are monsters, right? We've outgrown that kind of insanity, right?

Right. Sure. Right.

I charge my hole.

There she is, just like I knew she'd be. Big. Black. Fat. Ugly. She's tending the branches, the sticky swelling sacs growing from their distended buds at nodes along their hairy lengths. She swivels her head toward me, but like the rest of them, this Mama's too fat to move much. There're other branches there, unfertilized, and as I watch, I see her reach down to her swollen pouch and sop up some of the dripping honey-like secretion from her belly and wipe it over one of the branches.

"Die, bitch!" I hear Rico scream over the sizzling of his flamer. The Mama in front of me stiffens. I know she's sniffed the death that's come to visit her this fine afternoon.

More sizzling, this time from Helen's hole.

The Mama stops fertilizing that branch and just stares at me, all twelve unblinking eyes frozen on the metal intruder who's killed her man on the front porch and come charging in, neighbors roasting, baby-sacs sizzling, all of it.

God! The way she looks at me. Hell, yes, she's ugly. But after a while you start to see what's inside. I'm none too handsome myself right now, half a ton of metal with a hundred projections for sensors and weapons sticking out all over my body. My own mother would run screaming if she saw me, even if it were Mother's Day and I had a dozen roses in one hand and a box of chocolates in the other. But this Mama just looks, and I know she sees through that, like I see inside her.

"Burn, baby, burn!"

Rico's transmission splashes over my input plate. He's torched the branches in his chamber, and the egg sacs are bursting, tiny black shapes wriggling and squirming and popping. The Mama screeches, throws herself in front of the flamer as it swings toward the last branch.

Shit.

I look at my Mama. Hell, man, I can't do it. She hasn't moved. I just nod and turn away.

We link up outside in the tunnel, and that's when they hit us.

"Vengers!" Helen screams.

A cloud of a million airborne claws sprays from the lead Venger, locks on sonically to Helen's cry, and shreds her chest to nothing so her head goes one way and her legs go another.

Rico blasts the cloud. I blast the Venger. Then we run. Seven more Vengers square off ahead of us.

"Shit, man!" Rico clicks out his omnidirectional laser, and I go down. Then he's spinning, sending a sheet of death out about hip high all around him.

The Vengers, sliced in half, fall away.

"Let's get out of here!"

Sounds like a good idea to me, so I get up and follow Rico as he tries to retrace our path. I feel a rumbling and stop. His laser-fire's melted a lot of ice somewhere, and here it comes, a tidal wave surging through the tunnel behind me.

"Move it, Gordon!" Rico screams at me. He's made a higher tunnel opening ahead, but just as I reach it the water reaches me.

"Wally!"

Rico makes a grab for me, but the force of all that water knocks me away, carries me down the tunnel. Thermals tell me it won't stay liquid much longer. I try to anchor myself, to get up out of it, but I slip, and the water's got into some of my circuitry. I can't arm my melters or my weapons.

I'm slowing down. The water's clouding up, and I see ice crystals forming, reaching for me like the fingers of a lover, caressing my armor gently, then not so gently. Expanding, digging in, scraping my metal skin, exposing my metal organs.

I scream.

And they bring me out.

I sit up.

"Christ," I whisper.

Helen's in the cocoon next to mine, her V-controllers already retracted, her skin glistening with a sheen of sweat. She's crying.

I turn the other way. There's Rico. He's still active down there, I guess, 'cause his controllers are still hooked up and he has that faint frown of concentration that's the sign he's not aware of his surroundings here on the orbiting V-ship, only of his mech body and its virtual senses on the planet below. I hope he gets out with his mech intact. Dying really sucks.

So there you have it. Typical day in the life of Wally Gordon, Virtual-grunt, torn up inside because I froze, couldn't do it, failed in my mission and got my mech waxed anyway. But look at Helen. She toasted her Mama, and she looks like she feels worse than I do. Which brand of guilt eats your guts up faster? I gave up trying to figure that out a long time

ago.

So we come back to you. Yes, you. There you are, sitting across the desk from the recruiter, and he says, "How 'bout it, Soldier?" He holds the genescanner out in one hand and the five-year contract out in the other. It's do or die. It's decision time.

Right then, that's when I want you to remember old Wally Gordon and his romp on XXIV-7. And I want you to remember something else. That first wave of Kaxxitu ships they tell you about, the ones that blew Ganymede? They were a peace envoy. We started the shit, and by the time we realized our mistake, it was too late. See, the Kaxxitu breed so damned fast that by now the war's been going on for a hundred of their generations. As far as they're concerned, they've *always* been at war with humanity. And always will.

So you think about all that, and when you finish thinking about it, you get up, you shake that recruiter's hand, and you get out of there *fast*. It's not worth it, believe me. No stars, no stories for the kids, and virtual pain's the same as real pain, only you can die over and over and over again. Remember old Wally and walk away.

War sucks. □

The Dead Start Waving

By William John Watkins

*In the corner of our eye
the seen-but-unseen things go by.
We watch the blur the Almost-here
leave like the comet's tail in air
that shimmers suddenly then stills
as water ripples and then fills
to level where the dropped rock fell
so quick we almost cannot tell
if something happened there or not.
The fleeting shadows almost caught,
the dead we know cannot be here
leave afterimages of fear
we turn from them hurriedly and say
"tricks of the light" or "shadow play".
The dead start waving when we look away.*

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Making a Break for It



One of the chief blessings of being a book reviewer, other than Fame, Power, Glory, and the usual stuff (all of which refer back to the Schweitzer-Panshin theory previously discussed in these pages, that critics are appointed by God) is that you get so many books in the mail. Verily, if I never spent another cent on reading matter, I would have enough to occupy myself for several lifetimes already, not to mention a truly enviable collection of expensive reference books, better than what may be found in most university libraries.

So, this job has its perks.

It also has its drawbacks, almost identical to the perks: you have to read and review all these books, or at least a plausible percentage of them. This leads to the phenomenon of scheduled reading. Why have I never read *War and Peace*? Because I can't schedule it in among the things I have to read, for review, as courtesies (I've got one manuscript in hand I'm supposed to read in order to give a cover quote), for award-voting.

But ... the bibliophile's idea of Hell is living in a house filled with fascinating books you don't have time to read.

Every once in a while, we book-

reviewers make a break for it. I will sometimes impulsively grab something completely afield from my scheduled reading. It might be George Bernard Shaw's *Cashel Byron's Profession*. (Quite funny. Shaw's novels are generally underrated.) Or it might be "trash," rather like the bad movies we sometimes fashionably watch at horror conventions. (Remind me to tell you about *Coffin Joe* sometime. But not here.) Admittedly, I have a low tolerance for really awful pulp fiction — I can't read Doc Savage; Terence X. O'Leary's *War Birds* reduces me to hysterical laughter, though I never actually read more than a few pages of one of the novels — but I can read Edgar Rice Burroughs or Robert E. Howard with some enjoyment.

The most recent jailbreak consisted of *Startling Stories*, January 1940. (Is the Pulpophile's Hell owning a complete run of *Startling Stories* without having time to read them?) The issue sports a grandly silly cover showing green, bulging-headed aliens soaring over human figures, aboard what looks like an anti-gravity platform made out of brightly-painted locomotive parts. This has nothing whatever to do with the featured novel, *The Three Planeteers* by Edmond Hamilton. There are only two pieces of fiction in the issue, the Hamilton novel and a short story Oscar J. Friend wrote around that cover. (Martians come to Earth. They end up in a freak show. Crude social satire. Not bad, for the period.)

But I found the Hamilton novel, to my surprise, compulsively readable. I was indeed startled, not so much by anything in the story but by *how fast* I was reading it. At this point, the columnist's main survival skill — the ability to make a column out of just about anything — kicks in. There is something interesting going on here. It's worth your attention.

The Three Planeteers probably ought to be reprinted as a book. It's grand stuff, the pulp-magazine equivalent of an Errol Flynn movie, an interplanetary swashbuckler about three Good Guys (a Martian, a Venusian, an Earthman) who are hunted throughout the Solar System as pirates and outlaws; but, known only to the President of Earth, they are really on Our Side, and must maintain this guise to gain the confidence of assorted scumbags from Mercury to Pluto. Think of it as *The Green Hornet* in space. Confronted with an invasion threat from the Hitlerian dictator of the Cold Worlds (Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune — in the standard space opera milieu of the time, all Solar planets support humanoid life, rather the way most extra-solar ones seem to on *Star Trek* today) the Planeteers set forth on a quest for the super-element "radite," found only on the Tenth World, from which no one has ever returned. There's a beautiful Pirate Queen of the Asteroids, treachery, space battles, hair-

Rating System

☆☆☆☆	Outstanding
☆☆☆	Very Good
☆☆	Good
☆	Fair
☆	Poor

breadth escapes; in fact very little that wouldn't fit right into a *Star Wars* sequel. The scenes on the Tenth World are genuinely eerie, as the "radite" has kept the planet's original discoverers alive in a radioactive, glow-in-the-dark living death for two hundred years.

The emotional level of the whole thing I would describe as pre-adolescent. When our Earthman hero falls in love with the Pirate Queen and proposes to marry her, his companions groan. Oh no, will this be the end of the Three Planetees? (Kew! We can't have a girl in the club house!) Fortunately this conflict is resolved in about a column and a half of type; she turns out to be a tomboy, and now there are Four Planetees and everybody is happy.

I came away from all this with an understanding of how pulp fiction — a species which is very much alive today — differs from regular fiction.

Edmond Hamilton, by 1940, had become the definitive science fiction pulp hack. While he wrote some striking and original material from the 1920s onward (see *The Best of Edmond Hamilton*), he may have been the first science-fiction specialist to thoroughly master the pulp-writer's trick of writing the same formula story over and over again. (That he was called "world-saver" by the readers of the day wasn't exactly a compliment. But it did reflect his ability to pay the grocery bills. In the typical Hamilton story, the world — or the galaxy — was saved at the last minute from the Menace of the Month, be it Turtle Men from the Moon or protoplasm released by a mad scientist.) Of course many pulp-generalists came in and wrote science fiction the same way they already did westerns or adventure yarns, but Hamilton was an insider, who became a thorough-going pulpster. About the same time as *The Three Planetees* appeared, he began the

very, very formulaic *Captain Future* series, which also paid the bills, but so thoroughly wrecked his reputation that it took a long time for his later, more mature work to achieve even limited notice.

I asked myself: *Why am I reading this thing at four times my usual reading speed? and How come it seems good, when it is visibly bad?*

I concluded that Hamilton had actually managed to turn what would ordinarily be literary faults into virtues. *The Three Planetees* is enormously fast-paced. Devel-

MEETING IN INFINITY JOHN KESSEL



opments (like that final resolution with the Pirate Queen) which would take a chapter or two in an ordinary novel occupy a few paragraphs.

And there are a lot of said-bookisms. Writing instructors are always warning students (rightly) about the evils of using numerous synonyms for "said," many of which don't even describe methods of speaking. Pulp characters are always gritting their dialogue, but never, I am puzzled to note, with a mouthful of sand.

Hamilton writes like this:

"I've only hate for treacherous liars!" she flared...

"Lana's right," the Uranian squeaked and the girl glanced gratefully at him. "Make the best of your time until morning, Planetees," rasped Brun Abo as he and his men left...

"John, they didn't leave any guards outside," said Sual Av quickly in the darkness. "Maybe we can get out."

(p.51)

Said-bookisms are stage-directions, indicating tone and context. In "good" writing they are, at the very least, unnecessary, since the scene-setting, characterizations, and texture of the prose itself will convey the required information. (Example I use in writing classes: It is unnecessary to write: "I'll kill you!" he screamed threateningly.)

But, notice how quickly Hamilton turns yet another plot-twist. In about four column-inches, our heroes have been unmasked as Earth spies, lost the affection of the Pirate Queen Lana (who now falls under the influence of the real villain, Brun Abo), been condemned to be shot at dawn, and are already plotting their escape. (Why dawn, on an asteroid? I guess it's traditional.) This isn't even an Errol Flynn epic; it's a cliffhanger serial in prose. With this kind of relentless pacing, there's no time for context, characterization, or even characters who speak in distinct voices. Such subtleties would not have been wanted or understood in *Startling Stories* in 1940. Notice how the dialogue-cues are used to show the changing relationship between the Queen and the Bad Guy, then to establish that the cell is in darkness without even a full sentence of description.

This is everything H.P. Lovecraft used to rail against in pulp-writing: jaunty, unsubtle, largely devoid of atmosphere or any sort of mature intellectual content. HPL was right, of course, but what Hamilton and his compatriots were offering was not "literature" at all, but a *different*

kind of reading experience.

In short, *The Three Planetears* goes by so fast because it is deliberately designed to be skimmed. Descriptions of more than a few words are rare. There are no reflective, expository, or introspective passages. The "said-bookisms" become a method for cramming in information as fast as possible. This kind of narrative is quite distinct from, say, the work of Gene Wolfe (or, to pick a Hamilton contemporary, Clark Ashton Smith) and it appeals to, I suspect, a completely different sort of reader.

I know a skimmer. He reads a book a day, sometimes more. He is almost totally style-deaf and has what seems to us highbrows, appalling taste. I don't think he actually reads those books, though, in the same way I read. He picks up only the broad outline. It's as if he can see the prose, but not hear or feel it. Edmond Hamilton was writing for readers like my friend. Such writing is alive and well today, though few of the perpetrators — as far as I can tell — are doing it deliberately, and with such consummate skill as Edmond Hamilton did in the old days.

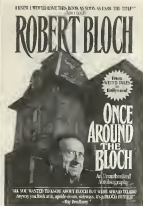
Maybe some of the generic fantasists, the people who pad out famous series for senior writers who have virtually become house names in their own lifetimes, and other purveyors of sharecrops, franchises, and endless series books, could learn a thing or two from Edmond Hamilton. There are far worse things than skillfully-designed skimming-fiction. There are turgid, unimaginative, thousand-page trilogies with the texture of mud. I can think of half a dozen series I'd like to see rewritten by the ghost of Edmond Hamilton. Think of all the trees that would save.

And now, let me spend the rest of this column catching up on my obligations. One of the other perks of the book-reviewer's life is that

whenever anybody tries to sell you their latest masterpiece, you can always say, "Well, you could just give me a review copy." It works, but now I have a backlog of things I have more or less promised to review. Conscience doth make readers of us all.

The New Arkham House and the Old

Tales of the Lovecraft Mythos
Edited by Robert M. Price
Fedogan and Bremer, 1992
327 pp., \$27.00



Meeting in Infinity
By John Kessel
Arkham House, 1992
309 pp., \$20.95

Already the hardcore of Lovecraft fandom is beginning to refer to the Minneapolis firm of Fedogan and Bremer as "the new Arkham House," and this is a response I suspect F&B has been trying for since the start; though it would be more accurate to say they've become the old Arkham House, while Arkham House, under the editorship of James Turner, has become something else entirely.

Arkham House began in 1939

as a memorial to Lovecraft. August Derleth and Donald Wandrei put up their own money to publish *The Outsider* and *Others*, and the rest is history. Some of the time, particularly in the mid-'40s, the company brought out the first books of the hottest, cutting-edge writers of the day — Ray Bradbury, Fritz Leiber, and Robert Bloch — but for the most part Derleth's Arkham was an exercise in nostalgia, each volume reaching back once again into the golden days of *Weird Tales* of the '20s and '30s, reprinting every conceivable scrap of Lovecraft (and when those ran out, Derleth wrote more), plus Lovecraft's contemporaries of varying degrees of literary merit, Clark Ashton Smith, Henry Whitehead, Arthur J. Burks, Seabury Quinn, etc. Derleth tried to continue the Lovecraftian tradition in his own fiction (*The Trail of Cthulhu*, etc.) and encourage others to do so (Ramsey Campbell's 1964 collection, *The Inhabitant of the Lake*). All this was done with considerable charm, and it inspired fanatic loyalty among regular Arkham House buyers. (In fact the only time Derleth really lost money was when he tried to vary the menu with British "literary" writers like Cynthia Asquith and L.P. Hartley.) Still, I think we have to be honest and admit that most of those books, by any reasonable standard, weren't very good. To the uninitiated, the contents of something like Robert E. Howard's *The Dark Man* (1963) must have seemed pulp dregs. Context was everything. No, it wasn't dregs, the aficionado would explain, it was minor work by a major *Weird Tales* author, some of which show distinct Lovecraftian influence...

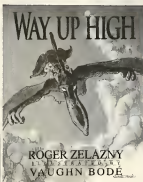
As soon as Derleth died and Turner took over, all this changed. I can't speak for him, but my guess is he felt that forty years of nostalgia was enough and he wanted to publish books which didn't re-

quire any excuses, which could be handed to someone completely unacquainted to Lovecraft and *Weird Tales* and hold up simply as good writing. Instead of Gary Myers and Lin Carter, he publishes James Blaylock, Lucius Shepard, Michael Bishop, and John Kessel.

Kessel's *Meeting at Infinity* (which is a World Fantasy Award finalist this year) is a collection of literary, almost "post-modern" (how I dread that term, which means almost, but not quite, nothing at all) fantasies, including the famous 1983 Nebula winner, "Another Orphan," in which a contemporary man wakes up on a 19th century whaling ship and gradually realizes that he hasn't merely travelled in time. He's in the text of *Moby Dick*. "Invaders" (1990) has three storylines: invading aliens land on Earth, demanding cocaine, then buying up and trivializing all humanity's cultural treasures; Pizarro and the Spanish murder the Inca and destroy Peru; contemporary writer John Kessel sits at his typewriter, writing this story. In the end, Kessel has managed to slip into the text, reach Peru first, and defeat the Spanish. In "Faustfeathers," we have *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus* re-enacted as a Marx Brothers film. (I'm not sure why.) "Buffalo" is — as the text reminds us — a story that never happened, about what might have taken place if the author's father, who glimpsed H.G. Wells from afar in the 1930s, had had a chance to talk science fiction with him. While some of the stories take their material straight, most of them are elaborately artificial constructs, reflecting philosophically on the meaning of fiction and the human comedy, deliberately blurring the boundaries between the made-up and the real. That Kessel can often (but not always) do this so skillfully, without having the whole thing collapse into pretentious gibberish, is impressive, but

this is a very specialized sort of writing, closer to metafiction than to most fantasy. These are stories about stories, writing about writing. They bear the same relationship to the main body of imaginative literature that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* does to *Hamlet*. The collection is a very interesting, but somewhat limited achievement.

Of course it is as far removed as it is possible to get from the old Arkham House's encrusted pulp gems — and that's where Fedogan and Bremer come in. Their books are even designed to look like the old-time Arkham House volumes. If the paper isn't the traditional Winnebago Eggshell, I'm sure it's only because F&G couldn't find



any. The imprint began with an actual, long-delayed Arkham House title, Donald Wandrei's *Colossus*, then moved on to Basil Copper's *The Black Death* (1991, \$32.00), Richard Tierney's *The House of the Toad* (1993, \$24.00) both of which Derleth would surely have published. What they're doing is deliberately taking over the publishing niche the current Arkham House has just as deliberately abandoned.

Tales of the Lovecraft Mythos is a companion to Derleth's *Tales of*

the Cthulhu Mythos (Arkham, 1969) and an attempt to rehabilitate Derleth's reputation by demonstrating that all the non-Lovecraftian changes he wrought in the Mythos had their roots in stories published in Lovecraft's lifetime or shortly thereafter.

Price is the editor of the splendid *Crypt of Cthulhu* and a master of this sort of literary archeology, but, let's be fair. Most of these stories (by Derleth, Kuttner, Howard, Duane Rimmel, C. Hall Thompson) are uproariously awful. At a recent Lovecraftian convention I bolstered a panel topic, "Is the Cthulhu Mythos Funny?" by reading from this book. (From Derleth and Mark Shorer's 1932 opus, "The Lair of the Star-Spawn": *For the thing that crouched in the weird green dusk was a living mass of shuddering horror, a ghastly mountain of sensate, quivering flesh, whose tentacles, far-flung in the dim reaches of the subterranean cavern, emitted a strange humming sound, while from the depths of the creature's body came a weird and horrific ululation.* As if a cavern may be other than subterranean, and a gigantic octopus with musical underarms can be other than horrific ...) Sure enough, these are almost without exception pulp stories — sometimes very rare, hitherto unreprinted ones, at least one never before published *Weird Tales* reject which Lovecraft professed to admire — and they demonstrate the inability of pulp methods (which may work well in a Hamiltonian space opera) to cope with the supernatural horror story, which, as Lovecraft was well aware, consists almost entirely of atmosphere, texture, and stylistic fine-tuning.

Of the stories present, only Robert Bloch's "Fane of the Black Pharaoh" and Robert Lowndes' "The Abyss" competently deliver the shudders. Clark Ashton Smith's "The Seven Geases" is sardonic. The others, at their best,

make us smile and fondly remember Lovecraft. Donald Wollheim's parody "The Horror Out of Lovecraft" (... there on the bedspread, revealed by the sudden flash of the electric light, lay the still quivering big toe of Eliphas Snodgrass) seems less parodic in this context. Editor Price has wisely saved for last Fritz Leiber's "To Arkham and the Stars," a warmly nostalgic, amusing account of a visit to the Miskatonic University Campus, closing the book on a suitable note.

But let's get real. This is not living literature. It is a fossil, entertainingly displayed, but a fossil nonetheless.

Ratings:

Kessel: ☆☆☆

Price: ☆☆ 1/2

Two autobiographies

Once Around the Bloch

By Robert Bloch

Tor Books, 1993

416 pp., \$22.95

Argyll

By Theodore Sturgeon

The Sturgeon Project, 1993

80pp., \$10.00

"Bloch was superb" has been a fanish hyword for decades now. The author of *Psycho* and numerous other horror stories is also a very funny man, much in demand as a toastmaster at science fiction conventions, noted for his witty fanzine essays (See *The Eighth Stage of Fandom*, recently reprinted by Wildside Press.) and so it is no surprise that his full-length "unauthorized autobiography" is a delight, filled with charming anecdotes, puns, and ribbing of old time friends. (Describing a rather loud, unknown science fiction fan of the late '30s, named Ray Bradbury: "I wonder what ever became of him.") Many things he prefers to leave private, but we do get the broad outline of a boy whose sen-

sibilities were shaped by seeing Lon Chaney as *The Phantom of the Opera* in the silent era, then had his life changed forever when he began to read *Weird Tales* and correspond with H.P. Lovecraft. He seems to have had a reasonably happy upbringing, with supportive parents, who, when he decided to become a writer after high school rather than go on to college, told him to give it a try. (This was the Great Depression, remember.) He branched out from *Weird Tales* to politics, advertising, radio, film — a life-long film buff, he is clearly thrilled to meet such idols as Buster Keaton — and coped with life's difficulties,



not to mention being tagged for life as "the author of *Psycho*."

The Sturgeon item is quite a different creature: written as therapy in the early '60s, never intended for publication, it is a vivid portrait of young Ted's horrendous relationship with his brilliant, emotionally-abusive stepfather, which colored his fiction and may have crippled his life. Every time the boy Sturgeon showed the kind of enterprise most parents would applaud — building a home-made radio, getting one job after another, excelling in sports — his stepfather (a grim Scotsman nicknamed "Ar-

gyll") crushed him. Needless to say, his science-fiction collection was destroyed, his literary efforts discouraged. When Ted graduated high school, was shuffled off into a horrific merchant-marine academy, and his parents then prepared to move to Europe, he was forbidden to come and see them off, lest he get kicked out of the merchant marine and become a "burden" again. A lesser soul might have turned serial killer, but instead Sturgeon went on to write about love. Still, he understood that his hatred of "Argyll" had distorted the whole second half of *The Dreaming Jewels*, and he could never quite apply himself to anything, for fear that Argyll would come in and take it all away from him.

If ten dollars seems steep for an eighty-page booklet, remember that the proceeds are being used to finance the hardcover republication of all of Sturgeon's short fiction. Order from: The Sturgeon Project, c/o Paul Williams, Box 611, Glen Ellen CA 95442.

Ratings:

Bloch: ☆☆☆☆

Sturgeon: ☆☆☆☆

Three from Necronomicon Press

Necronomicon Press is a prolific publisher of pamphlets and magazines by and about H.P. Lovecraft, or related to horror fiction generally. Among their recent effusions, I can recommend:

H.P. Lovecraft:

Letters to Robert Bloch

Edited by David Schutz

and S.T. Joshi, with a

preface by Robert Bloch

92 pp., \$10.95

This is a major Lovecraft correspondence, rich in the Old Gent's charm, and in raw data for scholarship. It is a really astonishing testament to

Lovecraft's generosity. Bloch, a high school student with a large ego and no particular accomplishments, wrote to Lovecraft, care of *Weird Tales*, asking where he could get copies of some of HPL's stories. He got back vastly erudite epistles, in which Lovecraft treated him as an equal, critiqued his fledgling effusions and offered patient (and extremely sound) writing advice, offered to lend him books and tearsheets, dropped candid comments about other writers of the day (e.g. that Robert E. Howard's letters were of greater literary merit than his fiction) — at a time when Lovecraft was the reigning master of the horror story. It's as if a 15-year-old today wrote a fan letter to Stephen King, and not only got a personal answer and help with his stories, but soon found himself initiated into an inner circle along with Ray Bradbury, Richard Matheson, and Ramsey Campbell. That kind of thing just doesn't happen anymore. The Old Gentleman was definitely one of a kind.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

The Lodger

By Fred Chappell
28 pp., \$4.50

Fred Chappell is a World Fantasy Award winner with a very small amount of quite distinguished work in the fantasy field (most of his books are poetry or regional — Southern — novels), to which he now adds this funny satire about a tenth-rate poet who sells his soul to the Devil for the ability to return — in spirit at least — as soon as somebody in the future reads his book. Many, many years pass. At last, someone does. Then our unfortunate hero finds himself possessed, and the way he drives the unbearably egotistical revenant out remains ... hilariously, lest I spoil it for you ... Too Hideous To Describe, even to a modern literary academic ...

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

Black Spirits and White
by Ralph Adams Cram
43 pp. \$5.95

Cram (1863-1942) was a noted architectural writer, whose sole volume of ghost stories (1895) has become a legendary rarity. Here it is, available at last. Of the five stories, at least three, "The Dead Valley," "In the Knopsberg Keep," and "No. 252 Rue M. le Prince" are outstanding, flawed by a slight tendency to overwrite, but displaying a deft eye for eerie detail. The horrors are — not atypically for a late Victorian — quite sexual, just under the surface. Recommended. A real bargain, considering that a first edition would cost you several hundred bucks — if you could find one. (Order from Necronomicon Press, 101 Lockwood St., West Warwick, RI 02893.)

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

From Donald M. Grant

Grant is a small publisher quite the opposite of Necronomicon Press. His specialty is deluxe, finely illustrated, often signed and limited editions, some of which (depending on the quality of the artwork) are very handsome indeed. Among recent Grant publications are:

Here There Be Dragons and *Way Up High*

Both by Roger Zelazny,
Illustrated by Vaughn Bode.
42 and 45 pp. respectively
\$40 each (slipcased if you
buy both).

These are two children's books Zelazny wrote in the late '60s. Bode, as most of you know, was one of the great underground comic artists, who died accidentally in 1975. I don't understand why they couldn't sell these volumes to a commercial press. Neither quite ascends to the level of, say, James Thurber's *The Thirteen Clocks*, but both are charming, and wor-

thy of widespread circulation. But I guess only collectors will see them, at these prices. Both volumes are limited to 1000 copies, signed by Zelazny.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

Gummitch and Friends

By Fritz Leiber
222 pp. \$60.00
(Trade edition, not seen,
fewer pages, \$30.00)

Here we have a collection of all Leiber's cat stories, including the Hugo-winning novella, "Ship of Shadows." The deluxe edition is signed by Leiber's widow Margo Skinner and by artist Rodger Gerberding, and contains tributes by Poul Anderson, Karen Anderson, Harlan Ellison, Ray Bradbury, Ramsey Campbell, Stephen King, and many more, making it a fitting memorial to this great writer, who was, indeed, a lifelong friend of the feline tribe.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

Reference

The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction

Edited by John Clute
and Peter Nicholls
St. Martin's Press, 1993
1370 pp., \$75.00

Someone suggested to me that a good panel topic for Philcon (of which I'm programming co-chairman) would be "What's Wrong with My Entry in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*." Well, what's wrong with the Darrell Schweitzer entry is that I fed Clute an incorrect date; otherwise he is factually correct, but, obviously having bigger fish to fry, only knows my career from book publications, and gives the impression that this Schweitzer fellow wrote a couple stories of genre interest around 1970, then "spent his energies variously for many years," before settling down to more fiction in the '80s. Actually, anthology and magazine indexes

will show my steady production of short fiction throughout the '70s, just no novels or collections. This is the complaint that a lot of American writers have: that Clute and Nichols are looking in on us from the Outside, and their view is necessarily distorted.

But such niggling is unworthy of this successor to the original Peter Nichols *Encyclopedia* of 1979. It is an awesomely massive undertaking, the book you (or any library) should spring for, even if you buy no other reference work. It is the only game in town, the one source for information on just about every contemporary figure in the field (as shown by the fact it would even have a Schweitzer entry) which will surely focus and define the way science fiction is studied for many years to come. Watch for "sharecrop," "franchise," "Big Dumb Object," and other Cluteisms to become part of the general critical discourse.

I'll take years of use for me to be able to evaluate this fully. There are millions of factual statements in it. Sure, a few are wrong. The publisher sent an errata sheet, and solicited corrections. I've found a few, but nothing that matters. This is a challenging, informative, essential book. If it doesn't win a Hugo next year, something is very wrong.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature 1975-1991
By Robert Reginald
Gale Research, 1993
1512 pp., (no price listed;
I think it's about \$100.00)

If you or your library wants to move beyond just one SF reference book, what you now need is this volume, and its 1979 predecessor, which together form the definitive bibliography, scrupulously researched, of the entire corpus of science fiction and fantasy. Together they form an indispensable tool for the scholar,

fan, critic, or anyone with an interest in the subject. If you want to know precisely how many books some other prolific author has published, when, and from which publishers (with title variants), this is where you go. I imagine that in a few years, this sort of book will be on CD-ROM, but for the time being, here's everything you need, on paper.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

We Resume Regular Services

Fiction. Yes, I remember that. I'm supposed to be reviewing

BEAUTIFUL SOUP

A NOVEL FOR THE 21ST CENTURY



novels and such. Next issue, with more time and all this backlog cleared away, I'll be reviewing more current novels. Someday I'd even like to do a column devoted entirely to first-novelists.

Meanwhile, one more I-promised-to-review item, and it's a novel:

Beautiful Soup
By Harvey Jacobs
Celadon Press, 1993
293 pp., 12.95

You may remember Harvey Jacobs. If not, look him up in the Clute/Nichols encyclopedia. He's

published delightful stories in *Playboy*, *Esquire*, *New Worlds*, *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and *The Paris Review*. After one collection, *The Egg of the Glak and Other Stories* (Harper & Row), back in 1969, he vanished from science-fictional ken, although he has had a successful career in other areas, including mainstream fiction and television. Now he's back, but on a small-press level, from a publisher I've never heard of, with his first science fiction novel. It's a satire, about a future in which social order (and inequality) are maintained by bar-codes on everybody's forehead. Alas, our hero trips in a supermarket line, and his bar code is accidentally altered from that of a Grade-A human being to a can of pea soup. It's hard to cope...

This is the sort of thing Robert Sheckley would have turned into a wonderful short story in *Galaxy* in the '50s, or, more recently, James Morrow could have done as an equally wonderful novella on the order of *The City of Truth*. Jacobs, I regret to say, is heavy-handed with the material. There are funny scenes, but the narrative drags. The characterizations aren't sharp; everybody lectures everybody without getting to the essentials. While Jacobs's effort commands respect, the story would work far better at half the length, at a much faster clip. Literary satirists, as much as pulp writers, need to pay attention to pacing. (Order from Celadon Press, 101 West 12th St., Suite 8G, New York, NY 10011.)

Rating: ☆☆

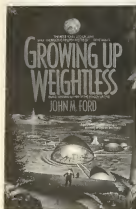


Brilliant Returns, Interesting Debuts

Growing Up Weightless

By John M. Ford
Bantam/Spectra, 1993
256 pp., \$11.95

John M. Ford is a fine writer whose main flaw is a tendency to obscurity instead of complexity. In *Growing Up Weightless*, an



unusual coming-of-age story, he overcomes that problem. There's a great deal going on in this book, things unseen and un-

solved in its depths; however, it is more approachable and comprehensible than most of his work.

The story is set on the Moon, about a century from now, long after the birth pangs of the independent colony there. Matt Ronay is a young teen-ager, son of an important politician, whose main goal is escape from constant supervision and predictability. He and his friends embark on an adventure away from adult oversight, and the results are not what they expected. Meanwhile, we follow Matt's father Albin in another coming-of-age story: that of Luna, which must shake off its own resentful relationship with its parent Earth to become truly independent.

The characters employ slang and a melange of languages that are sometimes difficult to penetrate but give the novel a realistic feel that is important to its success. There's a good sense of culture and history (though I'm dubious about the timeline required to arrive at this situation in a century), and Ford knows how to reveal it gradually without leaving the reader in confusion.

The characters ring true, both the adults and Matt and his crew; the author never forgets that, however brilliant and hyper-educated these kids are, they are still kids. Ford successfully depicts Matt and Albin's relationship from both sides and

subtly shows how it reflects the Luna/Earth relationship.

The plot doesn't feature a lot of suspense or excitement, just a believable coming of age. Cliches are avoided, and the long sequences where the kids are involved in a role-playing game are important and relevant to



the characters. The parallel story of Lunar politics is opaque at times, leaving you to ponder what the real answers are.

John M. Ford is one of our most talented writers, and this is very high quality fiction, as well as excellent science fiction.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆ 1/2

Rating System

- | | |
|------|-------------|
| ☆☆☆☆ | Outstanding |
| ☆☆☆ | Very Good |
| ☆☆ | Good |
| ☆ | Fair |
| | Poor |

The Kingdom of Kevin Malone
By Suzy McKee Charnas
HBJ, 1993
224 pp., \$16.95

It's a shame that the best writers can't also be the most prolific. Books by Suzy McKee Charnas are far too rare, and always a treat. Her latest, *The Kingdom of Kevin Malone*, is a remarkably complex and nuanced young adult novel.

Amy Sachs has fled her New York apartment, full of adults mourning the death of her favorite relative, to go roller skating in Central Park. Sud-

sorry for, because of his circumstances, yet he makes that difficult by being far from noble. There is no simple martyrdom here. Kevin is unlikable and unsympathetic—but, we must ask ourselves, wasn't he made that way? Like the reader, Amy tries, and fails, to remain sympathetic to him.

Because it grew out of the fantasy novels Kevin devoured, the *Fayre Farre* is, he acknowledges, a collection of clichés (and the occasion for some acid comment on the current state of heroic fantasy), yet it has some remarkably vivid and memorable elements, and it feels like something that would have grown out of the character. The final confrontation between good and evil is more dramatic than your standard swordfight, and the working out of the prophecy is fine. (I think it cheats slightly, but they usually do.)

But things don't end there; there are no easy answers in this book. Everyone tries their best, does what they can, muddles through life. Even the face of true evil is not one-dimensional in the end: there's a reason the White One is what he is. This doesn't excuse what he's done; Charnas is too tough-minded to allow our situations to excuse anything. No whining inner children wanted. In the end, when Amy chooses to return home from the *Fayre Farre*, she is choosing the more difficult and challenging alternative.

The Kingdom of Kevin Malone is a wonderful book for young teens, and very enjoyable for adults as well. It is another brilliant effort from one of my favorite writers.

Rating: ☆☆☆ 1/2

Virtual Girl
By Amy Thomson
Ace, 1993
248 pp., \$4.99

Amy Thomson's *Virtual Girl* is a very good book in many ways, and superior for a first novel. It is the story of Maggie, an android built by computer nerd Arnold Brompton to be his perfect companion. She travels with Arnold, learning about the world, until one day they are tragically separated, and Maggie has to make her own way, leading to changes Arnold never dreamed of.

Does this sound clichéd? It isn't, in Thomson's hands, partly because Maggie is such an engaging and believable character, and partly because of the inter-



denly, Kevin Malone, a bully from her past, reappears and leads her into the *Fayre Farre*, a magical kingdom he conceived as an escape from his sordid life and which somehow became real. Despite her distaste for Kevin, Amy is drawn into a quest, helping Kevin to fulfill a prophecy by becoming champion and defeating the evil White One. Naturally, in the process she learns a great deal about herself, her friends, and Kevin.

The most impressive creation in this story is Kevin Malone. He is a character you want to feel

Hogfoot Right and Bird-hands



Garry Kilworth
World Fantasy Award Winner

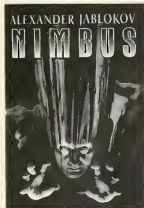
esting world through which she travels, particularly the future New Orleans. It is exciting to watch Maggie discovering her world and learning to pass as human. For the techies, Thomson does a good job visualizing the programming and technology behind Maggie, to the extent that's possible.

Now for the bad news. There isn't enough of a future feel to Maggie's world; too often it appears to be a few pieces of new technology layered onto our own world. Thomson includes a lot of material about homelessness

which rings painfully true but is, again, too contemporary. The populace's intense fear of robots — necessary to the plot — seems unmotivated by the bits of future history we're given.

The plot's realism is also questionable. Maggie is incredibly lucky, meeting so many wonderful folks in her travels who are just aching to help a penniless stranger, but maybe God looks out for innocents. A complete change of personality undergone by Arnold at one point is unmotivated. Ironically, Maggie is the most three-dimensional and human character in the book, which may be part of the point.

These flaws aren't obvious



while you're reading the book, which is absorbing and suspenseful. It's worth your time and money to introduce yourself to Maggie.

Rating: ☆☆☆ 1/2

Hogfoot Right and Bird-hands
By Garry Kilworth
Edgewood Press, 1993
156 pp., \$9.00

Hogfoot Right and Bird-hands is a superb short-story collection by a unique, bizarre, elegant

writer. Garry Kilworth's tales, which walk the line between fantasy and science fiction, are often surrealistic, generally disturbing, and always beautifully written.

Particularly noteworthy are "Spiral Sands," an evocative and haunting tale of the desert; "Inside the Walled City," a horror story about a sentient slum and the evil motives of those who visit it; "On the Watchtower at Plateau," a unique time-travel story; "Murderers Walk," an examination of justice, guilt, and the fear of death; and the title story, a frighteningly symbolic tale of a woman who has her body parts made into pets.

My mentioning these stories should not be construed to downgrade the others found here. This collection has made me a confirmed Kilworth fan.

Rating: ☆☆☆ 1/2

Nimbus

By Alexander Jablovkov
AvoNova/Morrow, 1993
384 pp., \$22.00

Nimbus, by Alexander Jablovkov, is a complex and involving novel, but ultimately a bit confusing. You start out not understanding anything, because the protagonist doesn't either, having suppressed his memories. Even as they're gradually revealed, the situation remains confusing —

there's a murder mystery involved, and someone who may or may not be dead, and strange connections — and in the end, some aspects are still unclear.

The book is set in a vividly limned future where brain modification is common and computer networking all-pervasive; it is not stereotypically cyberpunk, but it certainly has that feel, as well as that of *film noir*. There are some terrific cultural details; I loved the craze for creating alternate histories, particularly the jazz-centered one belonging to one character. These details are not just win-



dow-dressing, but become relevant to the plot. The world feels real, though I'm not sure I believe in the extent to which people are willing to mess around with their brains.

Peter Ambrose is a good everyman main character, though he is sometimes a little too dumb. I got tired, too, of everyone else making literary allusions that go over his head; was he the only one not decently educated? I also could have done without the whore with a heart of gold. But the characters are fascinatingly quirky, and the

Moving?

If you plan to move between now and January, please notify us. It takes several weeks for a change of address to get entered into the database, and you wouldn't want to miss your next issue of *Aboriginal Science Fiction*.

The U.S. Postal Service doesn't always forward copies, and destroys them, charging us 35 cents for the privilege. That's why we cannot replace lost copies without an additional fee, if you move and don't tell us.

relationship between Peter and his ex-wife Corinne is unusual and unexpected. The character Linden Straussman's hovering presence is made all the more frightening by us knowing so little about him.

The plot is suspenseful and scary. I like the role that chance and accident play, since they do play an important role in real life, and Jablovskov adequately explains major coincidences. The final resolution is creepy.

Were it not for its confusing aspects, I would give *Nimbus* a nearly unqualified rave. In spite of them, I strongly recommend it.

Rating: ☆☆☆



The Moon's Wife

By A. A. Attanasio
HarperCollins, 1993
234 pp., \$22.00

In his unusual fantasy novel, *The Moon's Wife*, A. A. Attanasio provides an inventive reexamination of an ancient theme, dealing with paganism with all its blood and death, not the cleaned-up version we so often see.

Sigrid Lindo (known as Siggy) is an ordinary woman leading an unexciting life until the day the

Moon chooses her for his wife. Unfortunately for her, he chooses to introduce himself by giving her an uncontrollably intense orgasm while she is in the supermarket. Later he talks to her, and repeats the orgasms, as part of his courtship, and, unsurprisingly, Siggy soon ends up in a mental hospital, herself unsure of her sanity. Then the Moon incarnates himself in one of the other patients, and the two escape with the help of a couple of witches, who introduce them to the rituals — and the risks — attendant on their roles.

Siggy is an involving, truly likable character. It is rare that a male author portrays a woman's viewpoint as well as Attanasio does here. The Moon, and Daniel, the man in whom he incarnates, together also make an appealing character, and Daniel's life history is interesting and believable.

The novel's ending is unexpected and works well. I liked the sense of rebirth for all concerned and the author's avoidance of conventional romantic clichés.

The novel's main flaw is its voice; though narrated by Siggy, the words are not believable as Siggy's. Toward the end of the novel, this is logically explained, but it is still a mistake. The writing's fine, but it's not hers, and that causes the whole book to ring less true.

Though a nagging and persistent problem, that is certainly not a fatal one. *The Moon's Wife* is imaginative and magical.

Rating: ☆☆☆ 1/2

The Lizard Club

By Steve Abbott
Autonomedia, 1993
159 pp., \$???

I'm not sure how to approach *The Lizard Club*, by Steve Abbott. Am I too straight (sexually and culturally) to review it? Not a novel in the usual sense, *The*

Lizard Club is an entertainment, a book of fireworks, maybe even a guerilla warfare manual. The center of the book is a homosexual man who thinks he is a lizard — or perhaps it's the other way around. I'm not sure of the connecting symbology, but it works.

There are literary delights to be had here, as well as humor and (at least for the straight) confusion. You will also find fun and food for thought.

Rating: ☆☆☆ 1/2

Anno-Dracula

By Kim Newman
Carroll & Graf, 1993
359 pp., \$21.00



Anno-Dracula is a brilliant vampire novel that is an alternate history and a feast for lovers of the late Victorian era as well. Kim Newman's book could be just a series of in-jokes, but it's a real novel, featuring characters you care about, fine writing, wit, political satire, and, of course, some horror.

The premise of the novel is that Van Helsing and his cohorts failed to destroy Count Dracula and he managed to enthrall and

marry Queen Victoria, later proclaiming himself Lord Protector. Vampires openly roam the streets, and young social climbers are eager to "turn" (into vampires) to assist their rise. Bram Stoker, Sherlock Holmes, and other political opponents of Dracula are in concentration camps. And in the slums of Whitechapel, someone is killing and mutilating vampire prostitutes with a silver

Anno-Dracula deserves the label *tour de force*. While working on all sorts of levels, it never abandons its plot, with suspense building right up to the horrific climax. It's a good candidate for the ultimate vampire novel.

Rating: ★★☆☆ 1/2

The Well-Favored Man

By Elizabeth Willey

Tor, 1993

440 pp. in pb, \$22.95

If you like courtly fantasy with wizards and dragons and royal family intrigues, you will enjoy *The Well-Favored Man*. Elizabeth Willey's first novel takes some patience — it's intricate, and takes a while to get going, and even longer to explain things. Once into it, though, you will find that it is witty and fun, though the plot is less coherent than might be desired.

Argyle is a small, peaceful kingdom ruled by a quirky family that can use the power of its magic Spring to work magic and to travel to other worlds, which apparently include our own. Gwydion, Lord of Argyle, faces a few problems: missing relatives, a plague of monsters, and a clever and nasty dragon. He also must face and resolve his own grief over the death of his mother.

There's an obvious comparison to Roger Zelazny's *Amber* novels, particularly with the ability to travel to other worlds. But Willey fails to explore the potential of that travel; the other worlds are barely seen. The book also lacks the edge of the *Amber* books; the only one who is truly nasty is the dragon.

The writing is engaging, despite some clunky exposition early on. The vastly different speech styles of the characters is jarring for a while, especially until you realize just how large an age difference is involved. I got used to it, all but the Elizabethan speech of

Gwydion's grandfather Prospero (yes, the one from *The Tempest*), but even then was taken aback by the occasional turn of phrase that seemed too modern.

Gwydion is an appealing character, but he seems awfully thick to be the chosen Lord of Argyle; it sometimes takes him forever to ask the obvious question or to see what's under his nose. Gwydion has a bunch of siblings, and they're not all given fully-

The Rediscovery of Man

It's Complete Short Science Fiction of
Cordwainer Smith

knife.

The more familiar you are with late-Victorian literature and culture, the more you'll appreciate this book, but it's not just for aficionados. With few exceptions, the historic and literary characters are well integrated into the plot. The historical extrapolation is seamless.

There's an ample share of horror, but most of it is not the bloody sort; some of the most horrible parts are the degradation of Victorian England to a barbaric medieval fiefdom, as well as the (historically accurate, with the addition of vampires) descriptions of Whitechapel, Jack the Ripper's stomping ground.

From the Bookshelf



formed personalities, though each is granted an identifying quirk. Those characters who are rounded, however, are interesting; I particularly liked Walter and one of the dragons.

The Well-Favored Man has a lot to offer to anyone who likes high fantasy: wit, intrigue, swordplay, and the occasional touch of terror. As Willey gains experience, she is likely to be a remarkable novelist.

Rating: ★★☆☆ 1/2

The Wizard's Shadow

By Susan Dexter

Del Rey, 1993

277 pp., \$4.99

Susan Dexter's *The Wizard's Shadow* is a better-than-

average fantasy featuring more intrigue than blood and thunder. It is the story of Crooken, a peddler who is forced to make a bargain with the shadow of a murdered wizard, who replaces his own shadow and takes him on a perilous mission to the kingdom of Ardyn. The wizard's shadow is apparently seeking revenge on his betrayer, but in Ardyn, little is as it seems.

The novel is competently written but occasionally features annoying fantasy-speak ("to forfend the least chance"). The featured magic has some resonances: the wizard is dead, except for his shadow; the shadow substitution itself; the true origin of Prince Kieron, heir to Ardyn.

Dexter's revelation of history in dreams works well. I saw a major switch at the end coming, but the big dramatic climax did come as a surprise. Crooken is likable, but the good guys are too good and the bad guys too bad to be truly believable. Crooken's mercantile operations, though irrelevant to the story, are more interesting than some of the court politics.

The Wizard's Shadow is enjoyable, with some images that linger, but it is neither striking nor highly original.

Rating: ☆☆ 1/2

Two Important Collections:

The Rediscovery of Man:

The Complete Short Science Fiction of Cordwainer Smith
By Cordwainer Smith
NESFA Press, 1993
671 pp., \$24.95

Far too many of you don't know who Cordwainer Smith was. The works of this underappreciated author, one of the great poets of science fiction, have long been out of print.

Now NESFA Press has collected all of Smith's short science fiction — that is, every

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bit of his *SF* except the novel *Norstrilia*. Most of the stories are set in the universe of the Instrumentality of Mankind, a remarkably textured and vast future history.

The Rediscovery of Man features stories like "Scanners Live in Vain," "The Game of Rat and Dragon," "Alpha Ralph Boulevard," "The Ballad of Lost C'mell," "The Dead Lady of Clown Town" — just listing them makes me want to go back and read them again. In addition to these and the other Instrumentality stories, it includes two previously unpublished pieces: a revision of his juvenile "War No. 81-Q," a very minor work, and the more interesting if not stunning "Himself in Anachron." It also includes "Down to a Sunless Sea," an Instrumentality story written by Linebarger's widow, and several non-Instrumentality *SF* stories, some of which reflect themes familiar from the others.

The introduction by John J. Pierce is interesting, but (unlike his introduction to the old collection *The Best of Cordwainer Smith*) not a good orientation for those unfamiliar with Smith; the book also suffers from the lack of a timeline (unfortunately, Pierce's original timeline was made inaccurate by some information in Linebarger's notebooks). If Smith's work is completely unfamiliar to you, it

might be worth seeking out a used copy of the book mentioned above for the useful introduction and timeline.

Everyone should own this book. Thank you, NESFA. Now, if someone would just bring *Norstrilia* back into print ...

Deathbird Stories

By Harlan Ellison
Collier Nucleus, 1993
295 pp., \$9.00

I find it hard to imagine that any of you have not heard of Harlan Ellison. He certainly makes his presence felt. Unlike some showmen, however, he's got the talent to back it up, in spades. He's one of our finest living writers, exclusive of genre, and it is our good fortune that he chooses to write mostly fantasy.

Deathbird Stories is possibly his finest collection (barring the massive retrospective *The Essential Ellison*), and certainly his most emotionally overpowering. The warning inside the front cover not to read the book at one sitting is not hype.

A single collection that includes "The Whimper of Whipped Dogs," "On the Downhill Side," "Pretty Maggie Moneyeyes," "Shattered Like a Glass Goblin," "Adrift Just Off the Islets of Langerhans ...," and "The Deathbird" — in addition to 13 other powerful stories of modern gods — belongs on everybody's shelf. □

Running the Gamut:

From Family Entertainment To The Undead



Usually: time lag between writing this column and publication ... six months. Here, now, it's a sweltering July 7th. The air conditioner has joined the choir invisible. I'm an unflattering shade of parboiled lobster. My vision swims. I'm here writing a column that will see print around Christmas. Schizophrenia is beginning to look like a workable solution to the Problems of Life.

But don't mind me; it's that time of the decade.

Which brings me to old business. In the Summer 1993 issue, I reported that Tim Burton was slated to adapt Valerie Burton's *Mary Reilly* after completing a picture based on the life of Ed Wood. Not long after I handed in the column, Tim Burton resigned from the *Mary Reilly* project in anger over the fact that the studio hierarchy put his Ed Wood project into turnaround. (It looks like Disney may offer Ed Wood a new home.) Since Hollywood abhors a vacuum (unless it's at the executive level), stepping in to fill the *Reilly* void is *Dangerous Liaisons* director Stephen Frears. Meanwhile, Burton has acquired the movie rights to Katherine Dunn's novel *Geek Love*, the story of a carnival family as told by Olympia Binewski, an albino hunchback dwarf.

Movies

With industry pundits predicting that this year's blockbuster *Jurassic Park* could, when you add in merchandising profits, rake in more than two billion dol-

lars, Universal will be trying to repeat its success this summer with the release of *The Shadow*. Following in the footsteps of such *Shadow* greats as Orson Welles on radio and Victor Jory on film, Alec Baldwin will don the guise of the man "who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men" as he battles Shivan Khan, the last descendant of Genghis Khan, whose ultimate goal is the destruction of New York City.

Costarring with Baldwin are John Lane, Penelope Ann Miller, Peter Boyle, Tim Curry, Sir. Ian McKellen, and Jonathan Winters.

Trying to double the odds of a fiscal winner, Universal will also release Amblin's big screen version of *The Flintstones* during the highly profitable summer months. The film will star John Goodman as Fred, Rick Moranis as Barney Rubble, Elizabeth Perkins as Wilma, and a much vaunted appearance by Elizabeth Taylor as Fred Flintstone's mother-in-law.

Spielberg's company has also optioned the Bari Wood novel *Doll Eyes*, a thriller involving a reluctant psychic, a small town cop, and a serial killer.

In what is beginning to be a natural extension of the film industry, Steven Spielberg will venture into the realm of interactive game design with *The Dig*. To be produced by LucasArts Entertainment, *The Dig* is a space adventure set in 1998, where a player takes on the persona of space cowboy Boston Low as he sets out on a shuttle mission to stop a mile-wide asteroid from hitting the

Earth. As yet, price and date of release are not set.

After 20 years in limbo, George Lucas has finally found a home at Universal for his low-budget, murder-mystery film *The Radioland Murders*. Although no start date has been set, this comedy, set in 1939, is about a series of murders that take place at radio stations. The *Moonlighting* writing team of Jeff Reno and Ron Osborn are currently rewriting the script.

Michael Crichton is reaping the rewards from his *Jurassic Park* success. His next novel, an untitled thriller involving sexual harassment, has been bought by Warner Bros. for close to four million dollars. The money includes a producer fee for Crichton as well as bestseller bonuses.

The comic-to-screen franchise will have another chance at your wallet next Christmas with the film version of *Judge Dredd*. In what may prove to be inspired casting, Sylvester Stallone has signed to play the 22nd century lawman. If the screenplay uses the wealth of characters available from the British comic books, including the wonderfully grisly Judge Death, this will be an E-ticket ride. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who was also interested in playing Judge Dredd, still has the previously-mentioned *Sgt. Rock* waiting in the wings.

For this Christmas, Fox's animated *Batman* series will head for the big screen with a new, full-

length *Batman: The Animated Movie* from Warner Bros. The film will use the same voices from the Fox series, including Kevin Conroy as Batman and Mark Hamill as The Joker. Batman will also face a new villain called Phantasm. The screenplay for the feature is by Martin Pasko, Michael Reaves, Alan Burnett, and Paul Dini, all of whom have worked on the series. Since the television show has proven to be so popular, Fox has extended the animated series to run through the 1996-1997 season.

Another comic book in the process of making it to the screen is David Quinn's *Faust*, published by Rebel Studios. Naturally, the story is a futuristic retelling of the Faust legend. The hero is a dead assassin who sold his soul to the devil. He comes back from the dead to stop a villain known as M. Stuart Gordon (*Re-Animator*) will direct, with Quinn writing the screenplay. Two versions of the film are planned, one for distribution in the U.S., with a more graphic version headed straight for video and overseas.

After *Super Mario Bros.* sank with barely a ripple, you would think studios would shy away from using popular arcade games as a source for their films. Not so. Imperial Entertainment is filming *Double Dragon*, an \$8 million feature based on the arcade game of the same name. Directing the feature is Jim Yukich, a music video director (that idea didn't fare too well as seen by *Aliens 3*), who will also direct extra footage for the proposed interactive game. (*Double Dragon's* franchise already includes a line of toys, a Marvel comic, and an animated TV show.) Scripting the feature are Paul Dini (*Batman: The Animated Movie*) and Neal Schusterman. The film takes place in a futuristic, post-earthquake California, where Los Angeles and San Diego are now one city called San Angeles (half of which is submerged). To free the San Angeles

streets from crime, two brothers, Jimmy and Billy Lee, must battle and defeat the evil criminal overlord, Shadow Boss. This is one of a new breed of films to be produced that will fall under the banner of "family entertainment," a term that has ricocheted around the industry as a response to perceived violence on television and film. The result seems to be that you can equate "family entertainment" with banality. One of the walking wounded to be hit by the flak is Robert E. Howard's Conan character. In his latest reincarnation, the network animated series *Conan and the Barbarian Kids*, Conan's main occupation is trying to keep three children out of "non-threatening danger?" Perhaps it should be renamed *Conan the Nanny*. It galls me to see a character that originally had bite being turned into a toothless fool for kiddie TV. Why don't we just cut to the chase and have *Jack the Ripper* turned into *Jack the Knitter*, or *Jack the Really Nice Guy* with *One Minor Character Flaw*. It could work!

Double Dragon is not alone. DIC Animation City and Batfilm Prods. have acquired the rights to a live-action feature based on the Carmen Sandiego character from the computer game *Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?* Carmen Sandiego is already a successful children's game show, along with an animated series that debuted this fall.

Currently in pre-production from Disney (a family-entertainment giant) is a \$15-20 million live-action version of the Rudyard Kipling classic *The Jungle Book*. The film is scheduled to start filming in India next December. Plans are under way for casting, with a proposed open casting call for the part of Mowgli.

From family entertainment to witchcraft. New Line Cinema has acquired the rights to an upcoming novel, *The Black Maria*, for director George Romero (*Night of the Living Dead*). The novel,

which will be published this Spring by Warner Books, centers on two truck drivers, a man and a woman, who stop to help a man on the road who claims he's cursed. He has to stay ahead of the curse to, stay alive. So, the trio drive across the country trying to stay ahead of the curse and find a way to defeat the spell. If successful, this could be New Line's next *Elm Street*.

Columbia's entry into the supernatural sweepstakes is a witchcraft story called *The Craft*. Peter Filardi's script revolves around three contemporary witches, a subject Disney's *Hocus Focus* found to be cursed.

A trilogy of H. P. Lovecraft stories will be combined to form the anthology film *Necronomicon*. The script is by Brent V. Friedman, who previously adapted Lovecraft's *The Resurrected* for the screen. Directing the three segments will be Japanese director Shu Kaneko; Brian Yunza, who has produced three films based on Lovecraft's stories; and first-time director Christopher Gans.

Vampires will be seen in a lighter vein (sorry) in an \$8 million action-comedy called *Dracula vs. Sherlock Holmes* from Double Helix and *Tale of a Vampire*, a romantic comedy starring Julian Sands. But, the big vampire news is the casting of Tom Cruise as Lestat in Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*. Neil Jordan (*The Crying Game*) will direct the \$40 million feature from the script he co-wrote with Anne Rice. Supporting actors include: Antonio Banderas as Armand, Stephen Rea as Santiago, and River Phoenix as The Interviewer.

Two men back from the dead, good vs. evil, is the theme of *Hideaway*, one of two novels by Dean Koontz currently being adapted for the screen. *Hideaway* will be directed by Brett Leonard, his first feature since directing *The Lawnmower Man*. Actor Dennis Quaid will co-produce along

Through the Lens

with partner Cathleen Summers. Also in the pipeline is *Midnight*; the screenplay is by Dennis Paoli, with Stuart Gordon slated to direct.

Horror compatriot Clive Barker is turning his successful novel *The Thief of Always* into a \$25 million animated feature.

Planet Earth strikes back against man's destruction of the rain forest in *Raging Earth*, a science fiction thriller starring Patrick Bergin and Helen Mirren.

Earth's destruction, this time by an impending meteor collision, is the story *The Hammer of God*, Arthur C. Clark's latest novel which has been optioned by Paramount for development.

The *Star Trek: The Next Generation* crew will graduate to features next year when they start filming the 7th *Star Trek* film for a Christmas 1994 release. To fill the television void left by *TNG*, Paramount has given the green light for a new crew and a third *Star Trek* series.

Maybe. Maybe not. Recent rumors around Paramount have the *TNG* crew for an extra season. Whichever way Paramount decides to go it's a win-win situation.

Films in the pipeline: Visual effects wizard Robert Skotak (*Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, *The Abyss*) along with Nicolas Seldin, has written a virtual reality thriller called *The Brink*. Set to direct is Joe Dante, whose past credits include *Matinee*, *Twilight Zone: The Movie*, *Gremlins 2*, and *Innerspace*. Upcoming from Trimark are *Cyborg II: The Glass Shadow*, starring Jack Palance, and *Evolver*, a robot-on-the-rampage story. Remakes include: *The Island of Doctor Moreau*; *The Man Who Could Work Miracles*; *20,000 Leagues Under The Sea*; and *Forbidden Planet*. Other films include: *Cyborg Cop II*; *Cyborg 3*; *American Cyborg*; *Nostradamus*; *Project Mankind*; *Trancers IV & V*; and *The Hidden II: The Spawning*.

Through the Lens

Television

On July 26, 1993, filming began on the *Babylon 5* series, which is slated to begin airing mid-January 1994. There have been some modifications to the cast: in addition to returning series regulars Michael O'Hare (Commander Jeffrey Sinclair), Jerry Doyle (Security Chief Michael Garibaldi), Mira Furlan (Minbari ambassador Delenn), Peter Jurasik (Centauri ambassador Londo Mollari), and Andreas Katsulas (Narn ambassador G'Kar), some roles have been recast. At press time, Lieutenant Commander Susan Ivanova will be portrayed by Claudia Christian (*The Hidden*), telepath Talia Winters will be portrayed by Andrea Thompson, Dr. Stephen Franklin will be portrayed by Richard Biggs, and Julia Nickson-Soul (*Rambo: First Blood Part II*) is set to play Sinclair's love interest, Catherine Sakai. In addition, each of the alien ambassadors will now have his or her own attachés. These recurring roles will be played by Stephen Furst as Londo's attaché Vir, Bill Mumy (*Lost in Space*) as Delenn's attaché Lennier, and Susan Kellerman as G'Kar's attaché Na'toth. Initial guest stars lined up for the series include David McCallum, Marshall Teague, Clive Revill, Mary Waranov (*Eating Raoul*), Judson Scott (*Star Trek II*), David Warner (*The Omen*), and Morgan Sheppard.

Scripts are being written by series creator J. Michael Straczynski, D.C. Fontana, Harlan Ellison (*B5* conceptual consultant), David Gerrold, Marc Scott Zicree, Larry DiTillio (*B5* story editor) and Christy Marx, with others TBA.

Season One of the *Babylon 5* series will explore many of the issues raised in the pilot: what happened to Sinclair during his missing 24 hours, why the Minbari mysteriously surrendered,

what the Vorlons are, as well as revealing more about the Psi Corps (a less benign organization than hinted at in the pilot) and Earth politics in 2258. The first episode to be aired, "Midnight on the Firing Line," has been described by Straczynski as "a real blow-out show designed to set the tone for the whole series."

(While visiting the set of *Babylon 5* during the shooting of David Gerrold's script "Believers," I volunteered my services as an extra. Although it was a great deal of fun, you'll have to squint to see me ... I appear as a nondescript blur. An impressive screen debut.)

The adaptation of Stephen King's *The Stand* is now being produced as an eight-hour miniseries for ABC television. Laker star Kareem Abdul-Jabbar has a cameo playing a Prophet of Doom announcing the end of the world.

In October, 1934, one of Milton Caniff's most famous comic strips was born. Sixty years later, *Terry and the Pirates* will be celebrating its birthday with a proposed one-hour live-action series produced by Michael Uslan and Ben Melnick.

And, lastly, fans of both the original and the new *Star Trek* can see a sky show and exhibit on display at the American Museum-Hayden Planetarium in New York City. The sky show titled "Orion Rendezvous: A Star Trek Voyage of Discovery" takes viewers on a journey through space onboard the starship Antares helmed by *TNG*'s Lt. Geordi La Forge played by Levar Burton. The exhibit, "A Retrospective of the '80s" has on display many of the alien costumes, Starfleet uniforms, Enterprise models and props used on the original series. The sky show and exhibit will continue to run through March 6, 1994. □

Sludgera Lives!



Have I got a headache. This pounding between my ears is no doubt a consequence of what I've been forced to read for the past several months.

Stretch Your Imagination Until Your Head Explodes Contest
That's right.

The responses are in and I've picked the winners. In the Summer 1993 issue I challenged the readers with a little problem: to seek answers so imaginative as to risk cranial explosion. And because I'm so thoughtful, not wanting you to have to dig through that mountain of magazines piled in the bathroom in order to find the Summer 1993 issue to refresh your memory, I'll go over the contest rules for you.

Background: You are at Venice Beach, California, having a picnic on the beach with Elvis Presley. As the two of you are about to attack a chocolate cheesecake, a massive bubbling and boiling occurs in the water offshore. Rising from the surf is the dreaded monster Sludgera — a self-aware, 300-foot-tall entity composed of non-biodegradable dirty disposable diapers, Styrofoam cups, and discarded Apple computers. In a sludgerous voice, Sludgera announces that its intent is to consume everyone on the beach, march inland to downtown Los Angeles, and then demand that it be given a seat on the City Council.

Problem: How can you save your life and every other life on the beach? Bonus points will be given if you can aid in Sludgera's quest for a City Council position.

Boundary Conditions: All known laws of physics are in action — you may not violate them. Sludgera's arrival coincides with low tide. Sludgera has no known food allergies. Sludgera is not wearing sunscreen. The solution must be

less than 100 words.

Tools at your disposal: any items found on a beach, along with the standard items that Elvis might bring on a picnic. Don't forget your imagination.

The purpose of this little exercise was for you to clean out the cobwebs in your head, to solve a problem one does not normally encounter, and to show that when it comes to solving problems, it is imagination that counts most and not the application of some dead old differential equation pulled out of the back of a moldy text book. As I explained in the Summer 1993 column, I was going to pick the ten most imaginative responses, and then comment-critique-analyze them. Choosing those ten was one of the most difficult things I have ever done. All the solutions showed wonderful imagination and all participants are to be congratulated. The ten responses that I've picked are listed below, put in no particular order (it is impossible to rank such strange things).

Here goes.

1. Rollin Gentry — Homewood, Alabama:

Ask Elvis to distract Sludgera with a few verses of "Don't Be Cruel". Mount the reflective rescue-blanket that Elvis uses to keep his zombie flesh warm during picnics to the underside of a beach umbrella. Turn the umbrella on its side, using it as a concave mirror to focus solar rays onto Sludgera's crotch, melting Styrofoam down between his legs. When his legs adhere and he topples headfirst onto the beach, make him promise not to consume anyone. Send pictures of Sludgera and Elvis to the tabloids, ensuring months of campaign publicity before the City Council election.

For reasons not completely clear to me, Rollin has decided that Elvis is dead — as implied by the com-

ment about keeping his zombie flesh warm. If one is willing to accept that rather bizarre premise, the use of the reflective rescue-blanket and the beach umbrella to melt Sludgera's crotch is truly inspired. This gives new meaning to the concept of jock itch. The weak part of this solution is that once Rollin has melted down Sludgera's private parts and gotten him down on the beach, that he feels he can convince Sludgera not to consume anyone. If someone did to me, what Rollin did to Sludgera, I would not be in such a generous mood.

2. Vance Atkins — Tacoma, Washington:

Elvis, gyrating and using a wire-less microphone patched into a mini-truck system, calms crowd with rendition of "You Ain't Nothin' But A Toxic Waste Dump". Using microphoneless wire, weight machine, and hydraulics from lowrider, builds catapult. Launches Industrial Strength Chocolate Ex-Lax at Sludgera (Elvis has been really irregular). Because of Apple/diaper-content interface, this causes massive data dump. Using Final Net from Elvis's touch-up kit, create ozone hole directly over Sludgera, breaking down Styrofoam. In weakened condition, Sludgera cannot maintain its silicon, which dissolves in shallow seawater, and precipitates as opal at bathyal depths.

Many excellent moves in this solution, from the use of that chocolate Ex-Lax to the massive data dump. However, this solution does not address the issue of Sludgera's quest for a City Council seat, although Vance claims in footnotes that he included with his solution, that because of the matter lost as a consequence of the Ex-Lax gambit

that Sludgera no longer has political aspirations. I'll have to go along with that. Vance's Ex-Lax solution causes one to ponder if his approach is applicable to an even wider range of targets — for instance, those suffering from terminal gridlock in Washington. Food for thought.

3. Ronald Jerome — Sherman, Illinois:

Elvis would distract Sludgera by singing "Nothing But A Hound Dog," in his rhinestone encrusted bathing suit. I would spike Elvis's cheesecake, jelly doughnuts, and fried peanut butter and banana sandwiches with the drugs he would have with him. I would offer these to Sludgera as appetizers while Elvis performed. Sludgera would fall asleep while Elvis sang "Love Me Tender" which would soothe the savage beast. I would help Sludgera sue the makers of the disposable diapers, Styrofoam cups, and Apple computers for back child support which Sludgera would use to help finance his quest for a city council seat.

This is a risky solution. Once again we see good use put to Elvis's singing talents, but the rhinestone encrusted bathing suit could be big trouble. The mental image that I conjure up of Elvis the Pelvis gyrating across the sand, wearing nothing but a G-string encrusted with rhinestones, seems insured to start Sludgera on a rampage. The concept of bringing a lawsuit on Sludgera's behalf is an excellent one, but I suggest that you not get actively involved yourself. Simply find a good lawyer, or for that matter a whole staff of lawyers and let them take over. If Sludgera surrounds itself with lawyers, it will no longer be so conspicuous (actually blending right in), and this will undoubtedly further aid in its quest for the city council seat.

4. Don Kappes — Cincinnati, Ohio:

Elvis is obviously safe because no one, not even Sludgera, can step on his blue suede shoes, let alone eat them. To save us ungodly folk, Sludgera is convinced that it needs votes for City Council rather than the protein provided by our feeble bodies. So it makes a health drink from the chocolate cheesecake and seaweed, which the health-conscious Californians will adore and

which provides it with plenty of energy, and serves it in Styrofoam cups. The rest is simple, as Sludgera is obviously anti-environment, the diapers suggest many extramarital affairs, and it is a homicidal maniac ... standard politician.

Dan offers us up a good solid solution. He has correctly surmised that any chocolate cheesecake that Elvis would bring to the beach would be of sufficient size to contain enough chocolate to make drinks for the many millions who live in Los Angeles. Very sharp of you, Dan.

5. John Terry — Ridgecrest, California

I'm a roving reporter for *Rolling Stone*, flirting with this honeydew blonde at Venice Beach. I look in her eyes. She's Elvis in drag, making his final comeback. I turn to look at the sun in eclipse, while the tide ebbs and washes back seaweed, med-junk, oilgoop, pantyhose, and straight jackets lost from a floating international asylum for the criminally insane. Crud and technocrud congeal into a mountainous monster, announcing itself as SLUDGERA, Master of the Mechanical World. I hand Elvis my Gibson. He strums "Heartbreak Hotel," singing the final altered line "The world is so lonely, it could die."

What can I say P. John Terry? The concept of Elvis in drag conjures up an image so intense, so disgusting, that I will no doubt carry it to the grave — perhaps beyond. I did not realize that Sludgera was Master of the Mechanical World. Perhaps you could let me know who is Master of the Nonmechanical world?

6. Horace T. Smith — Beaver's Beak, Montana:

Leave me alone. I'm dead. Is there any of that cheesecake left?

This is not exactly a solution to the problem I posed, but how could I not print this response? Is it possible? It's hard to tell, but the grease-stained envelope that it came in did smell of fried chicken and slaw. I'll let you decide.

7. Rick Norwood — Mountain Home, Tennessee:

Sludgera, comprised in part of Apple computers, is very slow. This gives us the time we need. We explain to Elvis that the good of the many outweighs the good of the few, or the one. He agrees to sacrifice

himself. We render his fat (mixed with the ashes of the white sequined suit he wore to the beach) into soap, and quickly bathe. Since Sludgera only eats things that are dirty, he passes us by, and eats Los Angeles instead. Whether even Sludgera is dirty enough to win a seat on the City Council remains problematical.

I highly commend Rick on the soap angle. I really don't think the cleaning approach will work, however, since someone as obviously disgusting and filthy as Sludgera is most likely not a picky eater. But in this case that's really not important. As so often happens in the world of science, many of the greatest discoveries occur by accident. And that is just what Rick has done. I suggest that Rick contact the folks at Graceland and begin immediate negotiations on the licensing of Elvis soap. There are millions to be made on this.

8. Nickie Smith — Yonkers, New York:

As I point out, eating humans ruins chances for city council. Elvis breaks down completely, pees his pants and begins playing his guitar badly. Sludgera enjoys the harmonic resonance in his Apple components, grabs Elvis, licks his head affectionately, and says "Forget it. You Humans taste delicious." I avert my eyes and notice a tire left by the tide. "Wait! It's the petroleum in Elvis's hair! Try the tire." Sludgera puts Elvis down, eats the tire, and smiles. In a letter to the City Council, Sludgera agrees to eat all city petroleum-based refuse if placed in charge of said waste disposal on city council.

Excellent use of petroleum by-product, Nickie. However, I'm afraid that it would be most unlikely that the city council would risk Sludgera sitting in the council chambers with them, having now realized its appetite for greasy, slimy, and slick things. There's not a politician in the land that would take such a risk. I would suggest that Sludgera simply blackmail the City Council, asking to be put in a city district far enough away from the other members so that their tantalizing petroleum-by-product scent would not make it lose control with the likely result of indulging in a few between meal city council person

snacks.

9. C. Little — Webster, Texas:

Death to Sludgera: In the low tide expanse of sand, you see a drum labeled DNOC — well-known styrene polymerization inhibitor — that a careless Monsanto supplier has let escape shipboard transport (of course, Monsanto wouldn't be trying to avoid strict disposal requirements for this bazardous chemical, not in a drum labeled DNOC). You tell Sludgera that you'd be more than happy to see him (it?) on LA City Council, but what with the ozone in the shape it's in and the other contaminants in the LA air, it won't make it to downtown LA without some sort of surface application of radiation protection. Sludgera, out of its marine comfort zone, believes you and rubs DNOC all over itself, dissolving the Styrofoam (and the diapers, this is nasty stuff), and collapses without its connective tissue. The beachcombers salvage the Apple computers, and of Sludgera, there is nothing left.

I suspect several things here — first of which is that C. Little is most likely an alias. I have no doubt that this solution comes from someone who either currently sits on the LA city council or is a competitor of Monsanto. Well, my friend, or whoever you are, attempting to dose Sludgera with DNOC will not work. It will actually revitalize it. Sludgera's diet has not been the most balanced one imaginable (high fat content from a predominantly people-only intake), and as a result it suffers a fair amount of arterial clogging. DNOC is the very thing that it needs to clean out those arteries and get that old sludge pumping at maximum speed.

10. David D. Palmquist — Audubon, New Jersey:

The daddy-long-leg type (to justify height/weight/gravity ratios & "marching"), Sludgera terrifies everyone into a panic. Elvis runs around knocking over trash containers. The sentient beastly is grossed out at the sight of its "guts" spilled about. This stall allows me to take the cheesecake knife and slice the 3 to 6 strings off of Elvis's guitar (depending on its quality). I use them to short-circuit-acupuncture a number of Sludgera's legs by sticking them through the Apple

computer-exoskeleton air vents. The monster is "downed" without enough flying buttresses to support its weight. To satisfy Sludgera's hunger, all the city's organic fast food leftovers are his — it tastes close enough to sunburned, sweaty and salty humans. A city council position is by vote. Vote is by volume of representation. Sludgera represents the largest cross-sectional volume in the city: trash. No seat, Sludgera eats. Everyone. And I organize the Sludgera Presidential Campaign.

This is very good — possibly better than David even realizes. This question of vote by volume of representation will require a lot of legal maneuvering to get approval. This implies lawyers. As discussed above, it is in Sludgera's political interests to surround itself with lawyers. However, what makes this solution outstanding, is the prospects of Sludgera as President. Talk about running a dirty campaign. I can hardly wait.

So there it is folks. All the winners have shown some real imagination, hopefully exploded many of the reader's heads, and I'm certain have had a lot of fun in the process. Don't let it stop here. Proudly hold your Sludgera banner high, and let your imagination continue to soar. That's it.

No.

Not quite.

Did you think I'd actually let this contest pass without showing you my entry? Of course not.

Robert A. Metzger — from somewhere way out there:

Elvis and myself are members of the FBI's alien task force. "Now, Elvis!" I shout. He picks up the

chocolate cheesecake, inhales most of it, then pulls out an Apple Alien Detector (20 MHz - \$88.95) which beeps at Sludgera causing the top of its head to flip open, revealing within: John Kennedy, Marilyn Monroe, and Jimmy Hoffa, who are actually aliens from Arcturus B, controlling Sludgera, and bent on our destruction. Using Coppertone and a Supercaker 2000, I spray the trio, dissolving them. Grateful for being liberated of alien control, Sludgera returns to the ocean, destroying the Arcturian's secret base. A joyful LA elects Sludgera to the City Council. Elvis and myself head north in quest of Janice Joplin and Adolph Hitler.

There you go.

What?

You added up the words in my entry and saw that I went slightly over. So sue me. Almost all the entries went over. And besides, it's my contest. Until next time, I wish you many strange thoughts and hope that your head occasionally explodes. □

Aboriginal SF welcomes letters to the editor. Please feel free to offer praise, criticism, or helpful suggestions on how we can make it an even better magazine.

Moving?

If you plan to move between now and January, please notify us. It takes several weeks for a change of address to get entered into the database, and you wouldn't want to miss your next issue of *Aboriginal Science Fiction*.

The U.S. Postal Service doesn't always forward copies. When it doesn't, it destroys them, charging us 35 cents for the privilege. That's why we cannot replace lost copies without an additional fee, if you move and don't tell us.

Thanks for your cooperation.

Combat as Hell

This week the horrible images of a dead American being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu and a hostage's battered and frightened face are seeping into the American psyche, opening old wounds of shock and outrage. We are painfully reminded of what soldiers must often endure. In the future, the particulars may change, but as two of our authors point out, you can be sure combat will still be hell.

In "A Word to the New Recruits" by Pete Manison, virtual reality soldiers are not spared the scars of war. Manison got his start with the 1989 story "Mothers of Chaos" that was a finalist in

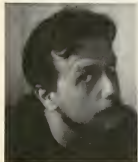
driver in Texas, and his hobbies include physical fitness and amateur astronomy.

"A Word to the New Recruits" is illustrated by David Deltrick, who has been teaching at a liberal arts college in Tennessee as well as freelancing. He says his love of sculpture and of building things has led him into more dimensional illustration: doing a sculpture, then photographing it. An example is an illustration in the December *Amazing Stories* that features his son Senn.

In "Shell Shock" by David Howard, there is no such thing as emerging unscathed from combat. This is Howard's

"Shell Shock" is illustrated by Charles Lang. As I write this, the fall foliage is peaking and pumpkins are appearing. Charles and wife Wendy Snow-Lang are noted horror illustrators and live in Salem, Massachusetts, so, naturally, October is a pretty special time for them. I hear they have been quite busy filling a Salem storefront with a display of their work. Halloween tourists will be in for a treat.

When an aggressive alien race threatens a planet, humans opt for appeasement but a computer has other ideas in "The Plowshares" by Richard J. Stuart.



D. G. Grace

the Writers of the Future Contest. His story "Hibernates" is appearing in *Tomorrow* magazine. He is collaborating on the story "Teledrone" with John Randal and he has written a novel called *Glacier*.

Manison makes his living as a truck



Derek Godat

first professional short story sale. He is an Englishman with a degree in education. He says he is most proud of his short story "Army" and is "trying to write a novel called *Rat School*." He recently tried scuba diving and called it "great and scary — and great because it was scary."



Anthony Ellis

This is Stuart's first short story sale. He has also written several sword and sorcery stories. Stuart is a New Yorker whose hobbies include doing magic tricks. Sounds like just the sort of skill he needs in his profession: he's a tax attorney.



Jon Foster



Peggy Ranson



Charles Lang's head



Robert Hodge

"The Plowshares" is illustrated by Larry Blamire, who is also the cover artist for this issue. When I spoke to him Blamire had just finished a nine-month run in the cast of the hit musical production "A Closer Walk With Patsy Cline" in Boston. He is back working on his screenplays and another dinner theater murder mystery. The cover art, he says, is something he did a couple of years ago on spec as a "fun piece."

Piloting a spaceship in "The Other Lessons of Phaedrus" by D. G. Grace means hitching a ride on the mind of a schizophrenic. This marks Grace's first professional fiction sale. He has a degree in Medieval and Renaissance Studies and is a graduate student working toward his master's degree in English. When he has time away from teaching and research, he likes to write short stories in various fantastic forms, from SF and fantasy to "all around weird." He recently penned a parody on composition journal articles called "Writing the Peanut Butter Sandwich: a Gastronomic Approach."

"The Other Lesson of Phaedrus" is illustrated by Jon Foster, who was surprised to open our last issue and discover he had received the 1992



David LeClerc



John Farrell

Boomerang (readers' choice award) for his illustration of John W. Randal's "Dead Sky Eyes." Foster has only been illustrating for us a short while, and this honor has made him "very happy and very excited."

Could some laid-back California beach burns actually be alien scientists? That's a crazy but somehow intriguing thought to the protagonist of "From the Beach" by Derek Godat.

Godat says he wrote the story "on a dare to see if he could actually finish a story beginning to end without getting disgusted and enraged mid-way through." He says his father found the story stuck away in a box in a closet a year later and told him, "Look at this beautiful story!... You could be famous and loaded like that Hemingway fellow, but all you do is lay on the floor and listen to bad records." So this story found its way to publication, but Godat says he recently completed "nothing," is working on "nothing" and "have yet to get my start."

"From the Beach" is illustrated by Peggy Ranson, who won the 1993 Hugo for fun artist. She said the day before the Hugo ceremony she had to attend a big family wedding in New Orleans, then get up before sunrise to catch



Cortney Skinner



Pete Manison

a plane to San Francisco. When she went up to accept the award, she was operating on three hours sleep and hadn't thought about what she was going to say, so she says she ended up just "babbling." She notes that winning made all the effort to get there worthwhile.

There is nothing but hopelessness, cruelty and violence in Deepcity until something else takes up residence there in "Deepcity Midnight" by Robert Hodge. Hodge's first short story sale was to *Amazing Stories* in 1991 and was titled "Epitaph for Earth Magic." He says he is now "gearing up to do a 'gritty future' screenplay and I've been assembling an art portfolio." He says he makes his living as a career student, and "this month's major is film."

"Deepcity Midnight" is illustrated by David LeClerc, making his first appearance in *Aboriginal*. LeClerc went to high school with Charles Lang where they worked on a magazine together. He lost touch with Lang, then called him out of the blue two years ago and has been working with him ever since. LeClerc, a member of the Society for Creative Anachronism, was working mostly in leather and metal costume but wanted to get into illustration, and credits Lang with "helping me out, pointing me in the



David Deltrick



N. Taylor Blanchard

right direction."

In "Storm Clusters" by John Farrell, a second-rate physicist asks for help in understanding his weird dreams. Farrell recently wrote a review of a Steven Jay Gould book for *National Review* and has written lots of short stories and plays. He says he got his start writing for cable TV and has done PR work for a national cable talk show.

"Storm Clusters" is illustrated by Courtney Skinner, who is happy with the way his cover turned out for Pat Anthony's *Conscience of the Beagle* just out from First Books. When I spoke to him, Courtney was about to take a break from the illustration classes he teaches to young students and his freelance work to grab a few days of R and R on Cape Cod.

In "The Fade" by Valerie Freireich, passing for white becomes easier, but racial identity gets trickier. Freireich is the author of "Repair Man" (*Aboriginal* 31-32) and "Measure for Measure" (*Aboriginal* 29-30). She just sold two novels to Penguin/ROC. The first one, *Becoming Human*, is due out in early 1995. Look for her novelette "Testament" in the December issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*.

"The Fade" is illustrated by N.



David Howard



B. J. Thrower

Taylor Blanchard. When I spoke to him he was getting ready for PhilCon and working on a young adult book for Houghton Mifflin. Blanchard says he missed going to the World Con but did get to see the Grand Canyon.

In "Fence of Palms" by B. J. Thrower, alien remains become a tool of last resort for a stranded worker. Thrower says "Fence of Palms" is the story she is most proud of, because it was the first first-person story she wrote, and it was her "first big professional short story sale — to *Aboriginal*." Last year she also had a dark fantasy novelette accepted for the anthology *Horseman, Storm*. She recently finished a 30,000 word pre-industrial fantasy novella entitled "Tree Blood and Dragon Bones" and she is working on some science fiction stories.

"Fence of Palms" is illustrated by Joel, who tells me she was asked to take over a cartoon drawing class at a private school in Montclair, New Jersey. She did, and found the 15 boys and one girl were keen on drawing superheroes. Now she has two new books for Scholastic, the first called *How to Draw Superheroes*, and the second, *How to Draw Super Villains*. She is also working on two book covers for Tor Books.

In "Rosebush" by Anthony Ellis, a young xenobiologist encounters a



Joel



Richard J. Stuart

strange family on an isolated planet. This is Ellis's first short story sale and the story he's most proud of so far. Ellis lives in Great Britain where he is majoring in English at a university. He is working on a short story and has a novel on the back burner. As for interesting things he's done lately, he says he "learned that I'm going to be published" and "built a sandcastle in Corsica."

"Rosebush" is illustrated by Charles Lang.

"The Dead Start Waving" by William John Watkins is a spooky-fun poem that sounds like it should be read aloud on Halloween. Watkins also brings us the poem "Xenopobe's Eulogy for Prometheus."

Watkins has been writing and selling poetry and prose for more than 30 years. He is the author of *Centrifugal Rickshaw Dancer* and *The Last Death Ship Off Antares* (Warner Books) and the short story "Coming of Age in Henson's Tube." He is now working on a mainstream novel, *Raised Among Wolves*. Watkins teaches literature at a community college in New Jersey, and likes to play a game called Green Bay Badminton, "a semi-contact sport played even in the snow on a tennis-sized court against my sons and other opponents half my age (also called trolling for a heart attack)." □



Larry Blamire

The Fade

By Valerie J. Freireich

Art by N. Taylor Blanchard

I am tall, blond, and, I'm told, fairly handsome. What am I? Not white.

"Hey, Chief," some fade says to me. "Got a tip for a friend?" The panhandler holds out a can, staring, trying for eye contact. I know the hit. I could walk past, but a white man never would. Their guilt, my momma says, but I wonder if all those white faces tossing coin in the cans had their momma say the same thing. I give him some change, and Marika smiles.

"I always do, too," she says when we're out of earshot, down the block. "It must be hard for them, being between."

Quaky ground.

Her arm is through mine, so we're really close; she bumps me with her hip. "Hey," she says. "Lighten."

I sigh. "I wish they'd stay in their own neighborhoods. This is getting expensive."

Marika laughs, but gently. "Not much of a social conscience for a scholarship boy, Luke."

"I work," I protest, but my gut twists at the same time and I wish I'd never told her my tuition was free. So I change the subject. "Can I see you tonight?"

"Well, I've got that anthro paper... Yeah, I guess." She teases me and I like it. She knows I do.

"Anyway, how do you know he doesn't live just off campus?" Marika says. "This might be his neighborhood."

"Who cares?" I say, tossing it off lightly. "He's just some bum. I'm done after the dinner rush, at seven. I'll come by then. We can go to the library together to study."

"You only like me because I'm a cheap date," she says, bumping me again. I enjoy the brief contact and remember her warm legs entwined with mine, the scent of her soft, straight hair falling on my face.

"That's not so," I say, stopping and pulling her against me. Her face turns up to look at mine — height isn't the fad for women that it is for men — and against her pale skin, her brown eyes are shining.

Mine, of course, are blue.

Therefore, I kiss her.

"Lu-uke," she says, pretending to be embarrassed, but I think that she enjoyed it. I did, too; I grin. Her eyes flick to the right, to the building where her first class is held. "See you," she says.

"A little after seven." I start to walk away, hurrying a bit so I won't be late for my chemistry lab.

"Luke!" she calls.

I stop and turn.

"Change your clothes, first! Okay? I don't need to smell the grease."

I roll my eyes and grin, then give her a thumbs up, and I'm on my way.

Chem lab is crowded, as usual. The TA hands me a bottle filled with something that looks like bath water and assigns me to a vacant place next to a black girl. I've seen her in the lecture, always by herself. The only one.

"Hi," she says and smiles.

I nod. I've got three hours ahead of me beside this retro mammy.

"Any good ideas?" She gestures at her own bottle of scum.

"We're not supposed to do it with partners," I say, frowning.

"Yeah." She turns away, snatching a yellow notebook out of her backpack. The angry way she moves reminds me of my sister.

I look at the bath water. I shake it, and it foams like detergent. "I'm Luke Hardin," I tell her stiff back. I don't know why. "The not-very-good chemist. With no good ideas. I skipped the lecture yesterday because I had to work."

Halfway through my speech she's turned around and is looking at me. "You work at McDonald's, don't you?"

"I'm the assistant manager." I shrug, but actually I'm proud. "Means I'm on call whenever someone doesn't show."

She giggles. "I'm Latanya Perry, the just-barely-adequate chemist. I've got a few ideas. I write a list first, then I prioritize." She holds up her notebook. "Saves time in the long run."

Latanya! Her skin is shiny dark and her hair is straightened, but she is a long-legged, willowy woman — I like the frame. I get out the text, sit down on my stool, and open the book to that week's assigned chapter. "My technique is to flip through the assignment looking for compounds that are mentioned more than once. You decide what's most likely this week and test for it. Never fails."



She watches me quietly for a while. "That doesn't sound like something that would be very useful in the real world."

"I'm not planning on becoming a chemist. How about you?" I realize I'm flirting with her — the whole 'what's your major' trip, though she's black and I'm ... not.

"Chemistry isn't a good career for me." She doesn't look my way and neither do I look at her. "Unless I want to be a lab assistant."

I'm not sure if I'm supposed to understand what she means, or if so, I don't know how I'm supposed to react. "It must be rough," I say sympathetically. I want to turn away, to get to work, but feel frozen.

She nods. "Especially now. There are so many fades passing that if you're black, people think there's something wrong with you."

"Umm," I say and flip pages in my book.

"It's what tonight's protest meeting is all about." She comes closer, onto my half of the big double counter. "We're trying to get more support, but not many whites are interested in black issues anymore." She hesitates. If I give her any encouragement, she'll continue, but I can't prevent myself from looking over at her. Guilt, my momma would say, and tell me to ignore it.

She catches my eye and nods. "Most of you white people think that if a black family doesn't use these prenatal genetic whitewashing treatments to bleach their black babies into fades, we're just being ignorant and stubborn and we deserve whatever we get. We're going backwards. Families who refuse to erase themselves out of existence aren't considered respectable anymore. Too many whites think real Americans are only white, or passing fades."

"Aren't they the same thing?" I ask. "Fades and whites?"

"No." She's even closer. I smell her cloyingly sweet perfume so strongly that I have to turn my head. Her hand is on the counter top; her nails stand out too pink against her black skin. Everything about her is exaggerated: too much color, too much sweat. "They can change the skin, they can change the hair and face — but that's superficial. A fade's soul is still black."

I've heard retro arguments before and it strikes me funny that she's preaching souls at me. I lean back, balancing the lab stool on its rear legs and smile at her. "How do you tell a fade from a white man, then? How did you know I'm real?"

She giggles again and tilts her head to the side. "You're too good," she says, authoritatively. "The parts go together; it's not a manufactured face. Plus, your ears are too big; that's white. And you have moles on your neck."

My right hand covers the moles; we both smile. "Thanks," I say as though I've been insulted, but I'm actually quite pleased.

"Besides, a fade who was trying to pass would never talk to me. They know they're really black and they'd rather die than look gray by talking to a sister."

I laugh, and let the stool down noisily.

She taps the counter next to me. "The administration is closing up its affirmative action programs for good at the end of this semester. They say there isn't any need for them because no one's disadvantaged anymore except by choice. That's what the rally tonight at eight is all about." She nods her head, watching me. "We're trying to get some white students to join us."

"Oh," I say like it's a mildly interesting but essentially irrelevant bit of information. Which it is.

"What do you think? Would you come?"

I wonder why she's picked me to proselytize. "I have a date tonight, Latanya." Her name is ugly in my mouth.

She fleetingly touches my arm. Her palm leaves behind a small patch of sticky sweat, which cools on me like a brand. "Well, think about it. Please?"

I laugh and say I will and joke some more about chemistry. She takes the hint and drops the subject, but she's not as friendly as she was. Why do I care?

I go to lunch — where else — at Mickey D's. It's free, one of the perks. The fade I'd endowed that morning is hunched over a burger and coffee at a table by the door. "Eat and out, Chief," I tell him on my way in.

"Aw, man," he whines.

The lines are six or eight students long, nine registers worth, so I take the employee entrance into the kitchen. "Luke!" the full-time manager, Bill Ash, calls when he sees me. "I was about to beep you. Someone's looking for you." He's cooler than usual. "A black girl."

I scowl. "Must be the one from class today. She's trying to recruit whites for this black protest rally at the administration building tonight. I thought I'd blown her off already."

Bill nods. I guess that he's relieved. Unless someone admits to being a fade, you can never really know, and to many people, knowing matters. "You want to duck out? She's in front, at a table."

"Good idea." I don't feel right about it, but I don't have anything I want to say to this Latanya Perry.

"Luke?"

I turn around. First thing I see is a black face on the other side of the counter, surrounded by irate whites, apparently because she pushed to the front of a line. It's been so long, I hardly recognize my sister Susan. When I do, I get that burning, sour taste in the back of my mouth and I think I'm going to lose it. I swallow hard. I look away from her. "Oh well," I say to Bill, "I guess I'm caught. I'll take care of this."

He's watching me real narrow again, but doesn't say a thing. I don't take any food, and — without looking at Susan — I leave the kitchen and come around. She's waiting for me. "Come on," I say to Susan and jerk my head back to the tables. It's dangerous to stay inside where so many people I know can watch, but it may be worse to be seen to leave with her. I lead her to an empty booth.

"Luke?" she says again, as if she isn't sure.

"What, you can't tell us apart?" I snap.

She stares at me and then she laughs. Susan has a good laugh, not sarcastic or defensive. It makes me smile, and I finally look at her directly. She has 'good' skin and her eyes are almost hazel. The family already had a lot of white blood when Momma decided to bleach me. But Susan has coarse, wiry hair, which at the moment isn't straightened, and a broad nose. Aside from that, she's actually quite pretty. "I'm hiding from Momma," she says, leaning forward. "I quit my job and she's mad."

"Why'd you quit?" Susan worked as a paralegal for a big Chicago law firm, a pretty good position.

She shrugs and looks vaguely over my shoulder. She's not going to say. "Can I stay with you awhile?" I hesitate.

Susan frowns. "Real white of you."

I flush. "You don't understand. I've got an efficiency — one room."

"I understand. Brother." She makes a production out of beginning to stand up. "I see what Momma raised."

Guilt is highly undervalued as a motivator. "Oh, all right," I say.

She sits back down the inch or so she'd risen. "Are you sure it's okay?"

I not only have to board her, I have to reassure her that I want to. "Of course. Aren't you the big sister who decked anyone who screwed over her fade brother? Fair's fair."

She grins, reminiscing. So do I. My muscles unknotted. There were other fades in our neighborhood, but most were state jobs, done for free to mothers on aid, whose arms had been twisted by do-gooder bureaucrats who thought they'd discovered the panacea for American race relations. They were black in every way but skin, and it showed, even when they tried to pass, which usually they didn't. They just stayed in the neighborhood, lording it over the shades and anyone like me that they thought was giving himself airs. Susan had been my bridge between their streets and Momma's plans until I got my scholarship to boarding school.

"Come on," I say. "I'll take you home." I figure she won't interfere too much in my life — I'm rarely in my apartment, anyway — and her stay is temporary.

"Don't you have to work?" She gestures around the place.

The Fade

I suddenly remember Bill Ash, but don't see him. The way my day is going, though, I'll run into Marika on the street and have Susan to explain. "Not 'til four today," I say. "I just came in for lunch, but I do have a class I really *shouldn't* skip." Guilt can cut both ways. "Why don't I just give you the key? I'll be home later, and we can talk."

She nods agreeably. "I'll get my stuff out of the lockers."

I have this image of her entire wardrobe crammed into train station lockers, but I don't ask how much she's brought. I give her the key and she puts it in her purse. "It's only four blocks off campus," I tell



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her. "Kind of a dive, but it's clean and cheap."

"A dive? Momma wouldn't approve of her fair-haired boy in a dive. Good thing she'll never see it, huh?"

We look at each other.

"Not your fault," Susan says then, looking straight at me. "It's how Momma raised you. She wanted a white son, and now she don't dare visit you for fear she'll blow it. Damn shame, though, don't you think?"

I don't answer, but I look right back at her, wondering what's really going on to make her come on so hard.

"Yeah." She gets up. "See you tonight, Luke." She walks away. I sit at the table a while longer feeling very tired. I sigh, about to leave, then Bill Ash is standing over me.

"What was that all about?" he says, looking in the direction Susan took. She's not quite out the door. "If it's any of my business."

He wants to know. I wish the entire world would vanish. "It's that girl. She thinks I owe her a favor because at the chemistry lab this morning she gave me some help — I'd missed the lecture. She made me promise to go to their meeting."

He nods. "So that's what she meant, she'd see you. Listen, Luke, sometimes a man can be too easy going. You should have told her to get her black ass out of here — she didn't buy anything."

I smile and shrug helplessly, then stand up, to get away from him.

Bill puts a hand on my shoulder. "If you want to get ahead in life, you have to learn when to say no. Don't get involved with blacks or fades. That's my advice."

"Yeah, you're right," I tell him, feeling resentful, but as usual I keep silent and only look obviously at my watch. "I'd better get to class." I leave, though there's plenty of time.

Bill Ash goes home shortly after I return at four to work. He's in a hurry, so we don't talk, but he seems back to normal. Dinner isn't as frantic as lunch, and the shift is easy. The second assistant relieves me right on time. I've just realized, no one who works at this McDonald's is black, and none is obviously a fade, either. I think about that, standing outside the building, then shrug. There aren't many black students anymore, and you can't really tell about fades. Look at me. You could go crazy, wondering, one by one, who is and who isn't.

I walk home slowly, not eager to see Susan, but I want to change and get the books I'm going to study with Marika. When I arrive, things are much worse than I'd imagined. Noisy music is playing, and I have to force the door wide enough to enter because a heavy suitcase has been dropped just inside. "Susan!" I shout between the singer's wails. I'm

looking for the radio so I can turn it off, and I see her sitting with some white guy on my sofa bed. His arm's around her shoulders, and they're passing a bottle back and forth. They both look ditched. Susan smiles. "Luke!" she screams, to make herself heard over the music. She turns to the white guy. "It's my little brother."

Naturally, he's a fade. In fact, he's the one who seems to have been following me around all day. He grins; he has a gold front tooth I hadn't noticed before. "Hey, bro," he says, but doesn't get up. Probably, he can't. He's too far in the ditch to recognize me.

I find the radio and turn it off. The silence seems loud and hollow.

"Hey," Susan says tentatively. "Luke, this is Isaac Ward." She extends the bottle. "Want a drink?"

"Get him out of here."

The fade, Isaac, looks at me then, head tilted to study me better. He's so ditched, I wonder what else he's been doing, and hope none of it is here.

There are two suitcases in the room. One is open and its contents are strewn all over the tops of things: the kitchen table, the keyboard and monitor, the chairs, the sofa's arms. The bathroom light is on.

"Hey, man," Isaac says. "What's your problem?" He squints at me, but doesn't focus.

Susan stands up. "Isaac helped me upstairs with my suitcases, Luke." She knows she's wrong. She puts some distance between herself and the fade. "You weren't here," she says, as if that makes her behavior acceptable.

"Out," I say to Isaac. He doesn't move. I doubt if he even heard.

"Don't scowl at me like that," Susan says. "You look just like Momma." She shakes her head, but stands rock solid. I see she's not as drunk as I had thought.

"Get him out of here," I say again.

"Why? Because he's black?"

I make a disgusted sound.

She puts her hands on her hips. "I'm black," she says. "You want me out, too, don't you, but you're ashamed to say it."

I ignore her and find a clean shirt and pants. Without looking at either of them, I go into the bathroom and close the door. I balance the clothes on the edge of the old sink and sit down on the closed toilet seat. My image stares at me from the full length mirror on the back of the door. A flushed, tense looking blond, blue-eyed white man. I hear them muttering to each other out there in my apartment, then remember Susan calling the fade black. She has never said that about me. I close my eyes and pretend I don't have any color.

There is a knock on the bathroom door.

"I'm not dressed," I say, taking off my shirt and throwing it next to the tub.

"I've seen every part of you," Susan says. "Who helped Momma wipe that pink bottom?" She opens the door and peers in.

I stand up and put on the clean shirt. "I have a date. I'll be back about eleven. Make sure he's gone."

"He's gone now." She crosses her arms across her chest. "Who's the date with — that Marika girl you've told Momma about?"

"I don't want a conversation, Susan." I drop my pants, but it doesn't faze her.

"Does she know your family is black? That you're a fade?"

It's something Momma never asks. "No."

"Uh-huh. A year with that girl and the subject of your family just never came up."

I put on my clean pants and push past her, into the main room. The place is a mess. I spin around. "Why'd you bring that fade here?" I yell.

"Because he's a nice man," Susan says.

"Oh, yeah. He's black."

She plops herself heavily down on the sofa and looks up at me. "You're not," she says. "Except you don't believe it. I know what Momma raised. The only question is, what kind of white man are you? Momma's kind, that passes? Or one who can have a black sister?"

I pick up a red blouse that she'd draped across the kitchen table, and fling it into the open suitcase, which is still half blocking the door. "You tell me what kind, since by now you should be an expert. Which white man are you sleeping with lately?"

We glare at each other for awhile, neither willing to look away first, then Susan begins to chuckle. At first I'm too angry to join in, and I storm around the room snatching up her clothes and pitching them into the open suitcase like garbage into a pail.

"Sorry I'm such a poor excuse for a sister," Susan says eventually. "I'll clean up the rest."

I look at her. She taps the place beside her, where Isaac had sat, but I go over anyway, feeling very awkward.

"I was trying to find the bottle. I brought it down from Chicago. The plan was to get ditched with you."

She pats my leg. I stare at her hand on my beige corduroys, but it just looks like Sue's hand, not alien or strange. Of course, Sue's lighter than Latanya Perry. "It's my fault," I say. "I'm not much of a brother. You're right. I'd rather you hadn't come, because it's hard, but I am glad to see you. You're my best friend."

"I know. You're mine."

We sit quietly side by side. I should call Marika, but I don't want to get up and lose this ephemeral tranquility. Susan leans her head against my shoulder. "I'm pregnant," she says.

I put an arm around her. For some reason, her news doesn't surprise me. I hold back a comment about her drinking.

"The father is a married white man. One of the lawyers I worked for."

"Momma wants you to have an abortion?" They're illegal, but common.

She shakes her head, kind of rolling it on me. "She wants me to keep it, but have it bleached." Susan exhales loudly. "It's most of the way to white already. Poor thing." She moves back from me. "That's why I came to you. To ask what you think."

The telephone rings. I get up on the second ring. "I have to," I tell Susan. She nods.

Marika says, "Luke? Where are you? It's almost eight o'clock!"

"I'm sorry. I should have called earlier. I'm in the middle of something, and I don't think I can make it tonight after all."

Susan is waving at me to go on out. I shake my head at her. Marika says, "Middle of what? What's going on?"

"I'm going to the black students' rally," I tell her. Latanya Perry's black protest sure has been a useful source of excuses. "Someone in chem lab asked me, and I couldn't back out of it."

Nothing from Marika. Susan is gaping at me, so I turn away.

"I'm sorry, Marika. I should have told you earlier, but I haven't had a chance."

"I could come," she says.

I can't tell if she's serious or just saying it because she wasn't asked. "It isn't your kind of thing," I say.

"Are you so sure you know my kind of thing?"

I feel a chill until I remember that I've met her parents. They're both white, and so is her older brother. "I've got to go," I tell her.

"Luke!"

I don't hang up the phone.

"I'll meet you there," she says and hangs up first. Great.

Susan smiles. "Isaac told me about the rally," she says. "Were you really going to go?"

"It's been in the back of my mind all day." Because it's Susan, I add, "I wasn't sure, though."

"Well, let's go together," she says, standing up. "I'd be proud."

"What about ... " I gesture vaguely at her abdomen. There are so many reasons I don't want her to attend the rally I can't even begin to think them through.

"A little night air isn't going to hurt it." She takes my arm, exactly the way Marika does. "Let's go. We're already late. That's where Isaac said he was headed when he left."

"That ditched dummy? A good reason to stay away."

"He's nice. He carried both suitcases down two blocks from the bus stop and then up the stairs."

"He panhandles for a living! You were better off with the married lawyer."

She pushes herself away from me. "How do you know who I'm better off with? You don't even trust your girlfriend enough not to lie to her about what you are."

I don't want to get into it again, so I speak quietly and calmly. "You said yourself that I'm a white man. Where's the lie? What difference does my family make?"

"If you don't know, then I can't explain."

"Oh, come on, Susan. What's happened to you? You were never like this before!"

"I got pregnant, that's what! And my own mother doesn't want my child, except if it doesn't look black like me."

"She had you, didn't she?"

"Yeah, and she was too poor to have me bleached and not poor enough to get welfare to pay — I've heard her over and over complaining about her nigger girl. Where were you?"

Susan is crying. Automatically, I put my arms around her and draw her close. Her tears dampen my shirt, and my arms tighten. I wish I had answers. I wish I had something to say. Maybe our mother is a racist bitch, and because my body's white, maybe for me it was okay, but Susan needs to be okay, too. "Don't bleach your baby," I say. "A child should be a part of you, and if he's a fade, a part of you is missing. A good part."

"You don't believe that," she says. "You think I should let them change his DNA until he looks like you."

"I think that race shouldn't matter, but it does. I think it's too complicated for easy answers, and that no answer is right or wrong. But I know one thing for sure: you should be able to love your baby, and you deserve to love yourself. You should do whatever it takes to make those two things true."

She looks up at me. I feel small, remembering the lies I've told all day, and all my life. "You deserve to love yourself, too," she says. "I wish you could."

"I'm fine," I quickly say. "It's Momma you should check."

Susan laughs. She takes my arm again. "Come on, brother."

We are late, and it's noticed because the crowd is not particularly large. They're gathered on the steps of the empty administration office building. I bite back a disparaging comment about the rally's timing.

The administration building has an open porch three or four steps up from the quad, and the porch is well lit. A group of black students is at the front; one of them is speaking but he hasn't much to say besides old slogans done in tent revival style, which they cheer on cue. Farther back are more people, a mix of black and white, but they are in the shadows

and very quiet, as if they are observers. It's to this group that Susan and I go.

"Hey! Susan!"

It's hard to see in the dim light, but I assume that the conspicuous voice must be that fade, Isaac Ward. I glance at Susan and roll my eyes.

She grins and shrugs.

Isaac appears out of the darkness like a pale ghost, and he's high enough to be ethereal. I swear his eyes are glowing. "Hey, Susan. How's your iceberg brother?" He has clearly never learned to whisper. Up on the podium, the speaker falters for a moment, then continues.

Susan murmurs something and draws him away from me. I'm scanning the crowd, but I don't see Marika. My relief is so strong, it's physical, and I'm giddy. I may just survive.

I stroll farther from Susan and Isaac, towards the lowest step. There's room, if I want to get closer to the speaker, but I don't. I stand at the edge of light, listening and watching. The usual midwestern haze has shrouded the stars, but the full moon lightens part of the sky without its being actually visible. The air is damp; my sneakers are wet from dew. There are crickets, or some such thing, and a dog barks. People come and go at the fringe of the crowd, but ahead of me the speaker is preaching to the converted. Despite the silliness, they clap and shout. Probably, Latanya Perry is with them, but I am outside that. I lean against the poured concrete railing, bored and feeling good.

A warm hand slips around my waist. I catch it and pull its owner close. She's smiling. "Marika," I say.

She leans against me. "I was afraid you wouldn't be alone."

My body blocks the light so I can't see her well, but she smells of soap. Her hair is down and loose; when I touch it the sensation is of touching silky threads. I memorize the moment.

Susan is not far away; I know she's watching, but she doesn't come closer. I realize that she won't. "I'm not alone," I say. "I came here with my sister. I think she's over there." I gesture. "She arrived in town today."

Marika doesn't turn and look. "Are you going to introduce us?" She cuddles closer. "Please?"

"Come on." Instead of taking her to Susan, we walk a few steps farther from the group, away from the light and onto the lawn. I take both her hands in mine. Although I'm staring into her eyes, I can't see anything because of the dark shadows. "My sister is black," I say. "I'm not white, I'm a fade."

She doesn't flinch. She doesn't say a thing.

I release her hands.

"Why did you tell me now?" Her voice is neutral.

Because I had to, or I couldn't respect myself. Because to fail to do so would injure my sister. I don't

say those things, but only, "I wanted you to know."

"It's about time."

I wish I could determine what Marika is thinking, but I'm happy enough she's still talking to me. "Do you still want to meet my sister?" I ask.

"Of course I do."

Susan sees us coming and meets us halfway. I introduce them and Marika extends her hand. Susan takes it and they shake. They both are peering at each other, trying to see, and neither of them is talking. "Well—" I say.

"How long is your visit?" Marika asks.

Susan glances at me and grins. "Not too long. I came down for some brotherly advice, and I've gotten it."

"What's that?" Marika twists around, looking up at me with a smile. In the background of our conversation, the people at the rally are cheering and stomping their feet. Susan glances back at them.

"They're right," she says, waving in the direction of the speaker. I'm amazed that anyone as intelligent as Susan has bothered to listen to the hokum. "The answer to differences isn't to make us all the same, but to ensure that differences don't matter."

"That's unrealistic, though," I say, then stop, because I'm on the verge of recommending she bleach her child. I shrug. "It's easier to be part of the majority."

"Has it been so easy for you?" Susan asks with a deceptive casualness that still embarrasses me in front of Marika.

"You two are so alike," Marika says. "Why worry? Just be people."

I smile at the naive white-girl solution because for me that means simply to be white and some part of me will never be entirely comfortable with that, yet by failing to be black, white is what I've chosen by default. I hug her and change the subject. "Want to get some ice cream?" I feel like I'm floating, very calm. Everything is better than I had any right to expect.

Marika squeezes my hand. "Good idea."

"Sure. Vanilla." Susan giggles.

We start to walk away from the rally, which seems to be coming to a close, anyway. Susan is just slightly behind Marika and me. I think, naturally with some guilt, that someday there might not be anyone black left. Gradually we'll all fade. I may be the beginning of the end, and I have no idea whether that is good. Still, it's a hazy night and I can't see that far ahead. Whatever Susan chooses to do, I'll be her baby's uncle. "You weren't surprised," I whisper to Marika.

She shakes her head. "You rarely mentioned your family and got all twitchy about blacks and fades. I'm glad you finally trust me, but it's not a big deal, you know."

I think she's wrong, but say nothing.

Xenophobe's Eulogy For Prometheus By William John Watkins

It's an old story really.

*How a godman comes
from the backside of the stars
to a young species
without the ability
to move faster than light,
or be in two places at once,
or know the sun
from a burning hole in time.*

*How lost among lesser men,
he has pity on them
and brings them enlightenment
and the ability to fold
the world into the mind.*

*And when he dies,
singing the songs he has taught them
in his own language,
everyone mourns
as if he had not
killed them all
and their ancestors
as surely as if he had poisoned them.*

*The worst murderers
always have clean hearts.*

Suddenly, Marika stops. "I have that anthro paper due next week. What about studying?"

"I think I've learned enough for today," I say.

Behind me, Susan chuckles.

"Hey," a voice calls. "Wait up, Susan." It's Isaac Ward, running to catch us.

"You go on," Susan says.

I can't, not when I'm feeling so noble. "A friend of Susan's," I tell Marika. We all wait.

Apparently somewhat sobered, Isaac says, "Where are you all going?"

"Ice cream." Despite my good intentions, my voice is tight.

"Oh, great!" he says. "Let's go to McDonald's."

Susan is choking down laughter. I hug Marika close, for courage. It seems I'm going to resolve all the riddles of my life at once, although there are no answers. "Good idea, Isaac," I say. "Let's go." □

Shell Shock

By David Howard
Art by Charles Lang

***F**ILE: In the winter of 1915 psychiatrists gave a name for the mental disorders engendered by war. This new catch-all term was shell-shock.*

DAY 1. 02.00 hours.
In the dark, Captain Conrad slipped down the sandbank, fatigue poisons weighing down his limbs, nerves scatty with repressed fear.

A rubber-snouted figure dropped beside him, stripes on its arms. They touched masks and shouted through the contact.

"Everyone out, Sergeant?"

"One didn't ..." Explosions interrupted. "Two and three ..."

"The remote ...?"

"Yes, sir."

The sergeant moved away. Conrad tried to see where he went, but it was almost impossible; the hazy infra-red imaging of his goggles was distorted by the defenses.

His body felt hollow — porous — as it always did in combat, probably because he knew that things truly were passing right through him. Radiation sliced his atoms; shock waves from the shells and rocketry hit him in a wall and then seemed to shudder through him like ripples in treacle; the infrasound defenses vibrated deep in his bones despite the heavy protective suit, making each individual tooth into a tuning fork; ultrasound pierced through earplugs, ears, and cut thinly into his cerebral cortex; strobe lights tried to peel his retinas away from the back of his eyes, even through the mask; psycho-holograms pulsing subliminally from lasers made him dream forced images; digitized propaganda waves clicked the small bones of the middle ear, whispering ghostly messages. The war flashed and roared inside and outside him until it was impossible to tell which was real.

Sergeant Crane was back, kneeling in front of him.

They made contact again and the captain snapped a question.

"What?" Crane shouted back.

"Charges laid?" Conrad bellowed.

"Yes."

Crane pressed buttons with a thick-gloved thumb and handed his officer the detonator.

The captain squinted down along the dip to see his men. He could see only one or two fuzzy hotspots embedded in the clouds of gas.

Conrad pressed the button.

The enemy installation blew like hell rising — sudden bright daylight.

***F**ILE: In World War Two, studies carried out on US infantry indicated that a staggering 90% of troops involved in a twenty-eight day tour of duty showed signs of battle stress. The vast majority of these suffered only short-term disorders, but this still had serious implications for combat effectiveness.*

DAY 2. 11.20 hours.

They had marched through the morning to the pick-up site.

"Sir?"

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Atmosphere readings show only thirty percent chems and minimal nerve agents."

"Minimal?"

"Below the level our NAP tablets can cope with, sir."

"What about sats?"

"Just had a printout, sir — confirms a momentary lull. Nearest damaging concentrations are around half a klick away."

Captain Conrad thought for a moment. There would still be anthrax spores in the soil, maybe others, and ...

"There're still the pheromones," he said.

"Yes, sir," said Sergeant Crane reluctantly.

"Okay, Sergeant," Conrad decided. "Masks and hoods only. Ten minutes."

He pulled back his own hood and the big gas mask. The sergeant did the same, and for a moment the two men looked into each other's eyes. It seemed almost indecent to see a naked face in the middle of no-man's-continents. The sergeant smiled, obviously thinking the same.

"That's nine and a half minutes, Crane."

"Yes, sir."

The sergeant moved away down the line, informing the others of the fluke lull in bombardment.

It would probably be all right, the captain thought. The sats could see each one of his men and detect concentrations of gases in their area down to levels a soldier need not worry about, and the behavior-altering pheromones needed time to have any real and lasting effect. But he had experience, and despite the satellite information, he felt wary.

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Ten minutes — no more. Things went wrong.

For a moment he wondered if he ought to get the men to take some more NAP tablets, but then decided they'd probably had sufficient dose already. He forced himself to relax. It was a relief to be free of the smell of mask rubber. What was going to happen would, whether he relaxed or not. He felt hot, dirty and oily as he lay back. Rockets arched overhead in the yellow-clouded sky. Something reminded him — a smell, maybe? — of lying under the lilac tree in the garden at home when he was a kid. In the breeze, the sun and shadow had come through the heart-shaped leaves in green dapples onto his face, making him half-close his eyes. The sky had been very blue; an almost plastic pure blue. Nothing like this sky. Funny how you think of stuff like that. Not people, no words or events, just things — nice, old things.

Forget it, he told himself. Think of that tomorrow. The automatic pick-up transport would be here soon. Think of the unit now. He had eight men left out of twelve. That was a very good casualty figure.

The sergeant interrupted his thoughts at that moment, carrying the computer over. A fresh, full-color map was in the process of faxing out of it.

Sergeant Crane tore out the sat-map and handed it to Conrad.

The pick-up transport had landed already ... thirty miles to the east. The wrong place.

"Any comments, Sergeant?"

"Fucking shit, sir."

"Agreed."

"How's Bakunin?" the captain asked.

"Bad. Still checking his equipment," Crane said dryly.

Bakunin was sitting down the line, his mask still on, looking suspiciously around him, and then quickly, furtively, moving his hand down to his crotch. He kept repeating the action.

"Any others?"

"Besant and Tressell are showing signs," the sergeant sighed. But Conrad was already looking back at the map. He had some figuring to do.

FILE: During the Vietnam War it was realized that the number of soldiers suffering battle stress dysfunction relative to the tour length was increasing: Approximately 90% in 20 days. Long-term, post traumatic stress disorders were also increasing. US casualties of that war numbered 50,000. However, that was more than doubled by the number of veterans committing suicide in the following years.

DAY 3. 15.00 hours.

The autofort fired rapidly in every direction: concussions, strobes, infrasound, confusion, hell.

A rocket scudded out hugging the ground and before it could even get up to speed it exploded into

one of the men.

Conrad ran, trusting luck, firing the armor-piercing rocket shells. He could feel the heat of his rifle-launcher through his gloves. Flame shot out of the fort near him, engulfing Blair. Blair's suit peeled back, and the man seemed to implode and crumple into the earth.

They kept running, firing, hoping, wheezing through the masks. At last the autofort was hit effectively. Its turret jumped heavily in a billow of blue-black smoke ... and it was over.

Quiet — inside and out — seemed to physically beat the men. No one moved.

The captain broke the spell.

"Spray! Spray!" he shouted. "The walking first."

Besant showered the captain's suit with the neutralizing chemical cocktail. The liquid ran over his lenses, distorting everything for a moment. Then he washed Besant down, and went over to attend the spraying of the wounded.

After cleaning Lee they realized he was dead. His suit hadn't been properly secured. The detectors had shown large concentrations of Sarin and Soman throughout the area. The nerve agents inhibited the cholinesterase vital for regulating nerve impulses, turning the brain into a reactor in melt-down. It was a quick death.

"Give me a casualty check, Sergeant," Conrad ordered.

They were down to five men.

After studying the map back at the original pick-up site, Captain Conrad had soon realized that there was only one option. The tactical computer had plotted the most expeditious route in concordance with terrain and enemy positions. Between them and the transport lay three automatic defense emplacements. And that had been it. One choice is always an easy choice.

And now they had succeeded in decommissioning the first one.

But it would get harder. Their mission had been loaded optimally, with tightly controlled ordnance. Although their ammunition consisted of explosive, incendiary ball, dum-dum and tracer shells, and armor-piercing rockets, only the latter were any use against the forts — the rest were so much excess weight and they had dumped them. But as no one planned to go up against any autoforts; they had very few rounds of the a-p rockets.

Around seven or eight rounds were just sufficient to destroy a fort. That was straight out of the manual. Any less than seven rounds would lead to failure — barring a miracle.

It was worse than that, Conrad realized. Only he and Sergeant Crane were now totally able — the other three surviving members were Besant, Tressell, and Bakunin. He quashed the sudden bitterness that came with that thought. He had been in

Shell Shock

tight corners before, and he'd always found a way out. He always had.

He'd do it this time, too.

FILE: *The Third-World Wars; a series of proliferating conflicts beginning with the Gulf War of 1991, now infamous as the first high-tech conflict. Battle stress now afflicted 90% of troops within 14 days. This was the first indication that a large growth in psychological casualties could be expected with increasing levels of technology.*

DAY 4, 20.30 hours.
They lay low, resting, as the sun set behind the ridge. The third fort was just over that rise.

"Last chance," Conrad breathed to himself. Today the CCS-T was reached and at any moment he himself might go over the edge. In the last few hours he had been feeling more and more jittery and knew he was too damn close to that edge. Battle stress was inevitable at the end of the four-day limit.

The sun kept going down.

"Come on, damn you," he urged, "there must be a way. Before you go over, too."

He looked over at his two remaining companions. Bakunin had only gotten this far because at the last fort he had lain on the ground, well out of range, in a cataplexy. And then there was Crane. He tried to look into the sergeant's eyes, but the glare of the low sun on the man's goggles showed only a mirror of his own alien mask.

"Just you and me left," said the sergeant.

The captain said nothing.

The sergeant's weapon fell out of his grip. He picked it up, and then slowly it slipped away again. Crane bent and picked it up once more, seeming confused as to why the rifle was on the ground.

"Just you and me left, right," he repeated. "Left, right." He chuckled to himself.

Captain Conrad tried to concentrate. God help me now, he thought.

The sergeant's rifle hit the ground again. It was a well-documented manifestation, Conrad knew: a soldier subconsciously rejecting the trappings of war.

"You and me and that poor crazy bastard," the sergeant said.

"That's right, Crane," Conrad said, but he wasn't paying any more attention. They had nine rounds left now. Maybe just enough for the final fort, but he doubted it. Not now.

They had three rounds each. And he couldn't ask even insane men to give up their rounds. Maybe that should be especially not insane men, he thought.

His own three rounds would not be enough. The manual said so — his experience said so.

Sergeant Crane gripped the captain's arm.

"You can rely on me, sir." His head twitched spasmodically.

Conrad could see that Crane was making an heroic effort to shake off the stress reaction. He was tough all right, but he wasn't to be trusted.

"I know that, Sergeant," Conrad said reassuringly.

He must think. Really think. There had to be some way of increasing their firepower. The manual wasn't God. He simply had to get his poor battered unit back.

Whatever he was going to do he had better do it quick. No one could be immune beyond the CCS-T.

And then he saw it.

FILE: *During the Prevention of African Development conflicts in the early twenty-first century there was a huge leap in technology. There were now 100% battle stress casualties after four days. This became known as the CCS-T: Critical Combat Stress-Time limit.*

DAY 5, 06.30 hours.

Captain Conrad lay in the bed at the psychiatric field hospital. He tried to salute but his bandaged arm wouldn't move.

"How are you feeling, Captain?" asked the general.

"Not too bad, sir. I was right on the edge of the gaga limit, but the doctors say I'm basically okay. I just need a little hypnotherapy to get rid of some bad memories, is all."

"I'm damned sure of it, Captain. You held together where lesser men would have crumbled. You'll get a commendation for this, Conrad."

"Thank you, General," the captain said.

"How in the hell did you do it? That's what I want to know," the general asked.

"It wasn't very complicated, really, sir. I realized that if I shot Crane and Bakunin I would waste two rounds, but I would gain six. With my remaining round that'd give me the minimum number necessary to go up against the autofort. That way I could save my unit. That was paramount in my mind, sir. Even so ... I guess we barely made it."

"It was a sound job, son," the general said. He was satisfied with Conrad's report.

TOP SECRET FILE: *The Great Australian War 2059*
T - ? The official figure remains at 100% shell-shock victims after the four day CCS-T. All efforts must be made to ensure 'continued commitment' to that figure. Lower ranking officers to be selected on the basis of a particular clinically defined reaction to battle stress: the delusion of enhanced creative problem solving. These leaders to be used for as many tours as they can bear. All other soldiers expected to have a probable one mission tour of duty and expire.

The true figure of battle stress: 100% in every and any contact with war. □

Fence of Palms

By B. J. Thrower

Art by Jael

My Lilly, with her fingers so white against the crisp, impersonal sheets on her hospice bed; they seemed to blend together, fabric and skin. She didn't want me to accept the job assignment, her tone angry, bittersweet, "Philip, no matter how much they pay you, it's not worth it!"

I nodded, pretending I hadn't already signed the contracts, that I wasn't packing to leave because I was desperate for the money the company promised to pay so she might be saved; but she knew. Lilly understood I was basically a coward, that I couldn't envision life without her. She *was* worth it, but I was going to do this primarily for myself.

Like unwilling apostles we were allowed to view the behemoth bullet of synthetic water. Liquid which didn't look or feel or act any differently than actual water, it was constructed of trillions of antiparticles and aimed at the throat of the poison seas. The antiwater would have an uncontrolled and accelerated point of collision, meaning the faster the velocity at impact, the greater the emission of gamma rays. This wholesome experiment, in which I was only a minor non-essential technician, would attempt to destroy this entire gutted planet.

En route, thousands of us workers had been informed by management that the destination world had been selected because it had been conveniently devastated by the previous occupants, making it untenable for native life forms or for colonization by us; and that it was near enough to ensure a cost-effective operation. Therefore, it was ideal for the company's purposes. We were often reminded how well we were being paid to work in such a hostile environment. And now after all the long months, the final preps for the experiment were on schedule, and the antiwater device moved into drop position.

With an occasional glance at the needle-shaped profile of the sound wave monitor perched on the horizon, I watched my toxin counter on my last six-hour shift. The counter measured any sudden increase of toxicity in the atmosphere from the trapped pockets of poison gas that were everywhere, some as large as vast lakes. I breathed canned air, was routinely provided with two air tanks, but it still made me nervous to think about how polluted this nameless planet was.

Early on there were rumors that a geological survey team had been trapped underground until they asphyxiated. That before they croaked, they found pyramids of alien skeletons. Mounds of them

to remind us of the First Really Bad Thing to happen here. It was interesting, but alien anthropology wasn't exactly why we were here.

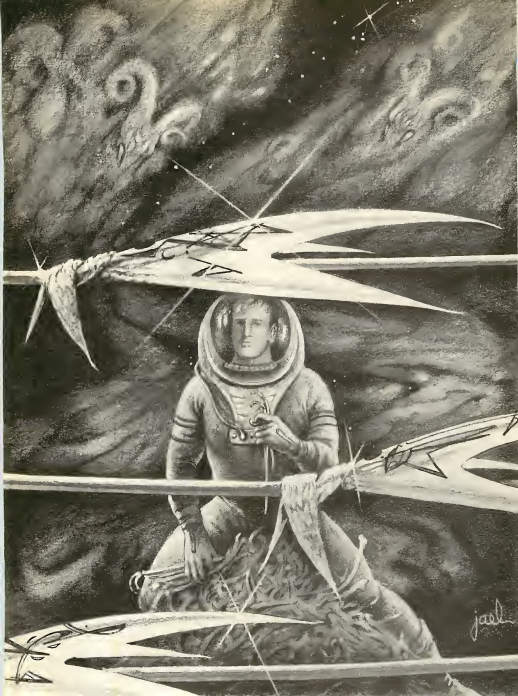
Like clockwork, every eighteen hours, my shifts were lonely and tediously dangerous. I'd gotten into the habit of wandering over to the nearby trench network, laid diagonally across the bleak countryside like silver thread. A relic from the aliens' genocidal conflict, the trench was clogged with greasy red mud wetted by rain so acidic it had slaughtered all the vegetation on the planet decades ago. The long gash of it was topped by three strands of taloned wire.

Each barb on the wire had indentations of varying designs; cruciforms with triangular tips, flowers of swastikas, miniature Stars of David, and other incomprehensible shapes. In my alternating moods of boredom and anxiety I'd begun to imagine the wires emitted a faint melody that was no accident of the breeze. Recently I'd discovered that by gripping the wire between talons and swaying it — like giant guitar strings — the song became more coherent. I made the mistake of mentioning the wire to my supervisor, Ramon Canada. He told me to shut my *dumb asshole* of a *stupid* mouth. End of discussion.

The trench led into a bunker maze of octagonal configuration, but wherever else it went, it hadn't been far enough or deep enough to save them. In my contract I was forbidden by the company to enter any alien structures, and it was one rule I obeyed. Often I'd wondered who the aliens were; why they had destroyed themselves. Inspecting it on the last day, I understood I would actually miss this alien fence and never forget the odd, melancholy song it sang for me.

At least the company had paid the generous salary promised and sent Lilly vouchers for every cent I earned. Lilly was going to live.

I saw the insectoid silhouette of a hoverpod from the mother ship. I greeted the sight with relief, as I was far down the chain of priority pickups, being 8,000 kilometers from the "point of collision" at the experimental site. My good feeling dissolved when I saw Canada lounging in the aft cabin. He was grinning at me behind his transparent facemask with his big, vampire teeth. I inhaled sharply inside my mask, because Canada never came to the surface. It



jaal

simply wasn't a job requirement for middle-management types.

The port side hatch opened. Canada leaned out to collect my toxin counter with its monotonous tick-tick-tick hiss of warning. I automatically tossed him my long-range communicator and my used air tank. The aft compartment was crowded with equipment and dozing personnel. Nothing was wrong.

"Cardiff, this pod's at maximum load capacity. You're gonna have to wait for another ride. You've got ninety minutes till detonation. Think somebody'll pick you up in time?"

Intending to wade through the clutter in the aft compartment in spite of Canada, I reached for the hatch hand grips, but suddenly he was in my face. Mask to mask so that no one else could hear, he said, "Philly, you're a nosy little shit. You shouldn't have noticed the wire, boy—but you did, didn't you?" He blocked my access with his gorilla body, and grabbed my uplifted hands so fiercely my knuckles popped. Pain galloped through my wrists. I realized they were sprained.

I tried to pull away but he was too strong for me.

"Sure, shithead, I'll let you go. So long, Little Phil!"

As he released me, I lost my balance and fell. For a few slow seconds Canada loomed above me, hollering up the ladder to the flight deck that I was aboard. Then the hatch clamped shut. Horrified, I watched the pod pitch and yaw, then shoot into the cloudy sky, boosters engaging like retreating stars. I was running as hard as I'd ever run in my whole life, but it was useless, pathetic, really. A black curtain of panic wrapped around my soul.

When I came to my senses, I was curled at the bottom of the artificial trench in the chilly mud. From habit, I consulted my watch, feeling miserable. *Oh, God, I've been lying here in a daze for twenty minutes!*

My shriek of despair echoed across the desolate, polluted land: "My name's Phillip Cardiff, and I-am-going-to-die!" Screaming my name, Lilly's name as a talisman against death, or a lunatic prayer. Because in T-minus 70 minutes, the antiwater bullet would detonate, too soon and too close for me even 8,000 kilometers away

"My name is Philip," I whispered. I stood and groped at the slick side of the trench. Digging and grasping with my fingers and boots, wheezing, struggling against the flat tank of oxygen strapped to my chest, I climbed until I could anchor my elbows in the cold slime underneath the wires. Panting from the adrenalin rush, I looked around and finally realized what it was I'd been trying to remember with these manic recitations of my name.

The sound wave monitor! It was designed to measure and transmit the harmonic flux of the planet's crust during the explosion until it, too, was

destroyed. There were several hundred monitors stationed around the globe. But my puny voice, my insignificant name couldn't generate enough sound to be picked up. If I tampered with it, they'd be alerted on the mother ship, but would they bother to send a pod to investigate? I sincerely doubted it.

"What good is it, Lilly?" I howled.

And then I knew.

I dropped heavily back into the mud, moving toward the alien bunker. I slogged through the quagmire as if I were up to my knees in fast water.

I hesitated at the black maw of the bunker entrance, recalling the warnings from the company. I didn't know what I'd find inside the tomb, but there was nothing out here. Reason enough.

Black as unstarry night. Smooth, granite-like concrete ran under my left hand as I tottered along a solid wall of invisibility. I held my right arm straight out and counted 78 steps before I stubbed my fingertips on a projection. I stopped, shaking my hand and cursing.

Images of alien booby traps raced through my mind, because the knob was pliant—it'd moved.

Straining on the toes of my boots I clapped both hands high up on the squarish form of the jutting knob. I leaned on it as hard as I could. My wrists ached.

Rrrruummmmmbbblle!

"Oh, Lilly, yohahitoh—!" I knew I was screaming, but I couldn't hear for the roar of a rolling mass that traveled directly over yet didn't touch me, a weight of sound that split in separate directions farther along the tunnel. Daylight tore the bunker in half and a rain of thick dust couldn't conceal that the ceiling was opening. Enormous unseen gears ground like boulders tossing in an avalanche. The ceiling retracted in layered sections, revealing a staircase cut deep in the rock wall on the far side of a chamber. The sound of the moving ceiling abruptly stopped.

I listened to the spattering sift of old, gritty dust and my own panicked breathing.

"Oh, God."

They were here. Alien skeletons lay in heaps, bones skittered by an ancient violence.

I cautiously entered the chamber. Beneath the topmost tangle of larger bones I could make out the pitiful outline of an alien child. The adults had tried to shelter it with their own bodies. I studied the skeletons. Each individual had a unique set of horns; blunted, curled like a ram, pointed, spiraled, some like racks of elk or moose antlers. Perhaps like our fingerprints, no set the same? I counted the thick shelves of the spine and discovered 52 vertebrae, twice as many as we had. And the pelvic girdle was unusually broad, like a beam of bone. Their hands had three fingers and a thumb-like extension, with strange, protruding designs on the

tip of each finger, and along the outside of the thumb, ridges of bone where the palms would be. I'd seen these before — *Ah, the wire outdoors, the flat talons on the wire!*

I sat down, breaking the floor tiles. My watch flared: 50 minutes until detonation. The pod must be rendezvousing with the mother ship by now.

I concentrated on the puzzle of hand-talons. I started crawling crazily from heap to heap seeking clues, lifting cold bones toward the dusty light. Yes, I'd seen this talon pattern outside, and that one, and that one, too!

"Lilly, what does it mean?" I squeezed my eyes shut because I was tired, I didn't want to think any more.

An eerie gust of wind swirled dust down the stairs, forming a miniature maelstrom. The wind was rising like a preternatural sigh from the planet as this bitterest of endings drew nearer.

At last I said, "Ah, I'm sorry. I'm not a bad person, normally, you see I'm not a grave robber, truly —"

I needed a big, sharp rock.

Did I look like a lunatic with my armload of bones as I staggered out of the bunker? Couldn't see over the top of the bones, couldn't even see my feet. Stumbling along the trench I tried to calculate which part of the wire was the most familiar. Where had I played it? Nothing was

familiar from this angle. I dropped the alien arm and hand bones I'd knocked loose from the skeletons. I had committed a sacrilege, but was it worse than committing suicide? I jumped, caught the slippery edge of the trench. *Too far west!* Dropped. Plopped. Stooped for my bounty of bones. Lurched back toward the bunker. Bones slipped out and clinked together in the soup of mud. I retrieved them, too.

When I found the place, I started pitching the bones upwards, over the three tiers of wire. The bones whistled and whirled like infuriated bees.

"Strike one! Strike two! Strike three, yeeerrr out, boy!" I launched myself at the lip of the trench and clawed upwards.

Like a lumpy snake, I wriggled under the lowest strand of wire. The talons marked crazed lines on my oxygen tank like the fingernail scratches of ghosts. Then I was past it, and stood up, panting and slobbering in my mask like a dog on a hot day. "What time is it? Twenty-five minutes until detonation."

I swept up the scattered load of arm bones, with flopping, knockknockknocking, weird elbow joints and spindly, fragile hand and finger bones. The patterns of the bony palms beckoned to me, pointing to possible salvation.

I lifted the bone of the wrist, guided it along the wire until, on my third attempt, the fingerbones slid into the depressions on the flat talon. I roamed the



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wire with companion pieces, matching, until all three tiers of the wire were draped with bones for approximately ten meters. I was at T-minus nineteen minutes.

Near the center of my fence of palms I took hold of the uppermost and middle strands, gulped in stale air, and began a rocking motion north to south.

The extra weight of the bones caused the wire to slice through my torn, soggy gloves. Hands bleeding, I screamed, "Play, dammit — sing for me!"

BOOONNNGGG! The shock of the single, crystalline chord stunned me and I lost my grasp on the wire. It swayed toward me but I didn't move fast enough and it connected with my tank. I went down hard on my back.

BOONNGG-BING-BONG, BING-BONG-BOIN-NGG. It was so goddamn loud it sizzled my inner ears with an exquisite pain, and the reverberations passed through my body like spears. Dizzily, I groped for some mud and rammed it into my ear canals.

TONG THUNDERRWONG THUNDERR BONG THUNDERR! The music flowed up and down an alien scale, ever more rhythmic and intricate.

I crawled while the wires pushed explosions of music over my shoulders like pounding surf. When I reached the base of the sound wave monitor, I collapsed. The decibel scale showed the wires emitting harmonic jolts equal to a 10.9 earthquake on

the Richter scale.

It was the ultimate distress call, theirs and mine. Help us, we are killing our children! Heed us in the hour of our need.

My oxygen supply bled out and I switched on the auxiliary chamber of the tank with its ten-minute supply. I lay, arms wrapped around my head, which didn't help my poor ears at all. I felt as if my forehead were bulging, about to split open. I observed the curious ripple of my clothes in the immense song of the fence.

TINGBONGBOOM-A-BOOMBOMBDOOM, BOOMBAMDABOOMBBOOM — *I'm floating in a universe of sound, alive in a womb of music. I'm dying, it's killing me, Lilly. My watch had shattered at T-minus eleven minutes. A pod required at least eight minutes to achieve orbit. No one would risk a pickup now, not this company's command pilots; I was wrong, Lilly ...*

Mud flying around me. I turned and saw a pod's churning air jets, dangerously close. The hatch was open, an arm gesturing to me.

Standing was agony. Another blast from the wire hurled me down, and tipped the pod so that I was almost incinerated by a twirling air jet. A figure clung to the hatch door grips. She was closing it — *Pod's leaving! No, she signaled me again, grim mouth saying, Get off your ass NOW!*

THUNDERRSONGCRUSHYOU PHILIP! I bent

A Long Time Ago

Before taking charge at *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, our editor, Charles C. Ryan, was the editor of *Galileo*, a science fiction magazine published in the mid-1970s. During his tenure there, he helped discover a number of new writers who have since gone on to win Nebula and/or Hugo awards, such as Connie Willis, John Kessel, Lewis Shiner, and more.

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beneath the concussion of the music as it flowed over me. Couldn't hear my own sobs for breath, for mercy. I straightened and lunged at the pod hatch, the only thing left to do — except die.

Hard gloved hands grasped my elbows and hauled me inside. Coughing, I squirmed on my side and saw the co-pilot cycle the hatch shut, read her lips as she turned: RAPID ASCENT, GET INTO RESTRAINTS! She declined to assist me, disappearing up into the flight deck.

I crawled onto the split vinyl of a flight couch. As my sore body sank into the cushion, the boosters trembled the pod with jarring vibrations and high goes battered me, making it difficult to strap in.

When the pod achieved orbit, the command crew began a roll to change attitude. I saw through the diamond of the hatch window the atmosphere below abruptly fading to white. Tremendous earthquakes moved across the planet's crust like surreal tidal waves and giant plumes of red ash arced upward, reaching toward us, and then dissipated. Cloud formations began to spiral down in a vast whirlpool of Armageddon motion ... My fence of palms was gone, surely it was.

In the calm of zero gravity I realized how exhausted I was and I wondered drowsily if anyone would find the mud in my ears. I was falling asleep. I pushed my hand into a pocket of my jacket to keep it from floating free and felt something. I pulled it

out and remembered how it had detached as easily as a flower from its stem. It was the tiny hand bones of the alien child.

My tears rose, shining in the canned air of the hoverpod.

I was stone deaf when I saw my Lilly again. But she never seemed to mind.

I was grateful for that. And grateful to *them*, that the last sound I ever truly heard was their song. Yes, it tore the fragile tissues of my inner ears and flattened the tiny hair cells that transmit sound to my nerves so they could not regenerate. But I was alive.

In my dreams, they visit me.

They crowd the doorway of my bedroom, swaying on their long bony frames like so much delicate glass. Now I perceive that they are true creatures of bone, with no outer skin. Their red eyes glow in the darkness like warm lanterns. I glimpse the haze of their brains, their internal organs, sheltered inside their bones in glimmers of gold and turquoise light.

The child comes into my room and it steps boldly. It is not afraid.

Bones clicking daintily, the shell child bows and speaks, "You are the one who heard."

"Yes," I answer. "I heard, but I was too late." □

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The Plowshares

By Richard J. Stuart

Art by Larry Blamire

*Dedicated to my father,
the late J. Marberger Stuart*

May 9, 2333 ...

Technically it was called APARC. The Agricultural Planning and Resource Controller. A fantastic device of artificial intelligence designed to enhance the economy of the colonial world on which it was situated. But to Dr. Sandberg it was more than that. It was his masterpiece of artificial intelligence. His child. Most of all, it was his friend. So when he sat down for another day at the office, he greeted it as he would any other coworker.

"Good morning, Aparc."

"Good morning, Dr. Sandberg," came the voice from the crystal terminal. "Did you have a pleasant weekend?"

"Pleasant enough," he said as he poured his morning coffee. "How are you this morning?"

"Very well, thank you." There was a faint pause before it continued. It was reluctant to abandon the morning's small talk for matters of business. It was truly a thinking machine.

"Dr. Sandberg, I have noted a potentially serious problem in agricultural production."

Sandberg raised an eyebrow towards the machine. He took a sip of coffee before responding. It was early for humans to get down to business, too. But he knew its moods. It must be important.

He sighed and put down the cup. "All right, Aparc, what's the trouble?"

"I fear the planet's incineration will adversely affect production."

Dr. Sandberg responded with a faint chuckle as he settled into his plush chair. It was a laugh of irony rather than humor.

"So you've heard of our little problem, eh?"

The crystal screen shimmered along with the Aparc's voice. The stylized terminal made an attractive interface for the mighty computer. "I could hardly help noticing, Doctor. The crisis is the talk of the town. You will recall that you programmed me to scan the news media for potential factors affecting agricultural production."

The doctor nodded his agreement, then shrugged. "Well, it's nothing for you to be concerned about."

There was a short pause before the Aparc responded. "I don't understand your conclusion, Doctor. The Vimons have already destroyed three colonial worlds. They have assuredly taken notice of

us. I do not understand how this can fail to affect our economy."

The doctor took another sip of coffee. "I simply meant that it is a political problem rather than an economic problem."

"I understand. Foreign relations are beyond my jurisdiction. Nevertheless, I must be prepared for all scenarios, including the possible occupation of our planet by the Vimons."

The doctor paused for his own moment of thought. The Aparc's concern in this matter was unexpected. But then, he had designed it to think. "I suppose you must plan for all contingencies. I don't, however, see any call for alarm. The Vimons have had a difficult time in the past. Their planet was overcrowded. They needed room to expand. Their neighboring planets simply invited trouble by engaging in an arms race. But the Vimons have won and all that is over. We won't have trouble with them. Our planet is peaceful. We have beaten our swords into plowshares."

"Nevertheless, the Vimons have requested substantial economic concessions from our planet. They have threatened military action if these demands are not met."

Doctor Sanders nodded grimly. "That is their way. They are a warrior race. I suppose it would be prudent to have plans for potential food shortages. However, I think the most likely scenario is that we will reach an accord with the Vimons. I anticipate a diplomatic agreement granting them additional trade privileges, and perhaps an economic settlement of some kind."

"You propose to grant economic concessions to the Vimons?"

The man nodded. "The Vimons are intelligent creatures. Our problems are simply matters of strained communication. The colonies which were destroyed engaged in aggressive behavior regarding the Vimons. Once the Vimons see that we are a peaceful planet meaning them no harm, we are sure to come to a reasonable accord."

"I see." There was another long pause as the machine thought. "I will prepare some economic forecasts to assist you in your negotiations. I can suggest several matters of trade which would be of mutual interest to our planets. I can also suggest several areas of concessions which would be benefi-



cial to the Vimón, but not unduly disruptive to our economy."

"Thank you, Aparc. That would be very helpful."

"Doctor, may I make an observation?"

"Of course. You are a thinking machine, as entitled to voice your opinions as any other thinking creature."

"Thank you, Doctor. I am glad you think of me so. I simply wish to note that historical precedent suggests a low probability of success in your line of negotiations. A policy of appeasement is generally regarded as a prescription for disaster when dealing with tyrannical warlike people. Notable failures include Neville Chamberlain's concessions to Adolph Hitler, the Centauri Colony's concessions to the African League ..."

"We needn't place the Vimón in the same category as Hitler. They are a reasonably advanced society."

"Of course, Doctor. As you say, I realize I am a novice at international affairs. I do, however, have one final question before we move on to other business."

"Go on."

"If the Vimón do occupy the planet, do you think I will be permitted to continue my functions?"

A trace of exasperation was in the doctor's voice.

"I've already said that won't happen."

"You are evading the question, Doctor."

"Very well. If the Vimón were to occupy the planet, which I must emphasize is highly unlikely, then you would at least be thoroughly reprogrammed before they permitted you to continue your functions."

September 14, 2333 ...

It was a more ragged version of Dr. Sandberg who greeted the Aparc a few months later, at one of their daily sessions.

"Good morning, Dr. Sandberg."

"Good morning, Aparc. How are you?"

"Fairly well."

"Only fairly well? What's wrong?"

"Nothing to concern yourself with, Doctor. However, I am experiencing some minor problems in archival data retrieval. The intermittent nature of the problem is making it difficult to locate the exact cause of trouble. It is nothing serious. I regret to inform you that certain information you requested regarding storage of mining lasers is temporarily unavailable. I have a maintenance team working on the problem. I suspect a quality control problem in the manufacture of the last batch of crystals. I have taken steps to ensure that the problem does not recur."

"Perhaps I can help."

"I am aware of your expertise concerning my structure, Doctor. But I feel this problem is unwor-

thy of your capacities. Especially as you seem to have so much else on your mind these days."

Sandberg nodded. "It's very true. The Council takes up so much of my time."

"I understand negotiations are not going well."

The doctor turned to the computer with a touch of exasperation. "I wouldn't say that. The Vimón are very demanding. It is difficult for us to communicate. However, I am still confident a peaceful solution will be reached."

"I believe the colony at Altar III had also reached an agreement."

Doctor Sandberg thought a moment before responding. "Reports from there are disturbing. But we don't know the full situation. You must remember never to listen to only one side of a story."

"I shall adhere to that advice."

"By the way, that reminds me of something. I notice you've been authorizing some construction lately. Especially in mining equipment. You seem to be setting up some new ore handling systems?"

"That is correct. Recent breakthroughs in superconductors indicate substantial long-term savings may be obtained by modernizing certain of the ore handling systems involving mass drivers. You will note that I have also authorized reinforcement of a number of facilities throughout the colony. My calculations indicate a substantial probability of increased seismic activity and potentially destructive storms."

"Oddly, none of our other weather prediction programs concur with your opinions in this regard."

"That is not surprising," noted the computer.

"The factors which indicate this probability are somewhat subtle. That is why I was created. To keep track of environmental variables beyond the capacity of most computers."

"There is another problem. The Vimón have protested that some of our construction looks like we are preparing for a bombardment. As you know, with the current political situation, we must be very careful not to display aggression."

"I was not aware that the construction of storm shelters could be construed as an act of aggression."

"It isn't, but we must be careful of appearances."

"I see. Nevertheless, I feel that continued construction is imperative. Perhaps if I supply you with additional information regarding my geological and atmospheric predictions, it will help in your negotiations."

"I think that would be wise. Thank you, Aparc."

"You are most welcome, Doctor."

February 4, 2335 ...

There were visitors to the lab that morning. Dr. Sandberg was accompanied by two gentlemen in military uniforms. The gentlemen were aliens.

They had two arms and legs, but they were obviously reptilian, and had light brown scaled skin. They were dressed in brown camouflaged robes with large bone buttons, each elaborately inlaid with a kind of scrimshaw. These were the Vimons.

"This, gentlemen, is the Aparc. It is the heart of our colony and the secret to our success. It coordinates most of our operations on this colony. Road construction, investment in new technologies, agricultural planning, weather forecasting, etc."

The men looked on with interest. They spoke English with a strange whistling accent. "A fascinating device. Truly an impressive technological development. We have nothing close to it in terms of computing power. Tell me, does it also coordinate your military activity?"

"No. The Aparc is a purely peaceful creation. I didn't do my years of research for the military. That is one reason I came to this colony. To get away from the militaristic attitudes on my home world."

"Then this machine has no contact with your military?"

"None at all."

"That is not strictly correct, Doctor," spoke the machine.

The officers looked up with interest. "Indeed, your creation contradicts you, Doctor."

Dr. Sandberg looked reproachful. "Come now, Aparc. What possible connection could you have with the military?"

"You forget, Doctor, that one of my functions is civic planning. Within guidelines provided by the civic council, I establish base facilities for police and National Guard units. I handle a number of non-military functions for them, including sewage treatment, recommending sites for disposal of hazardous wastes, and construction of housing for base dependents."

"Ah, you are correct. I had forgotten. Still, the police hardly count as military."

The Vimons officer gave a grim toothless smile. "Your machine is correct there, Doctor. We Vimons know better the ways of the warrior. Police can and do become military units in emergencies. It is interesting that your machine should recognize this. Tell me, Aparc: you have no other military programming or functions, other than handling housing and sewage?"

"No. I am the creation of Doctor Sandberg. He finds all matters relating to the military deeply abhorrent. I am his true son in this regard. I would find the deliberate taking of any sentient life deeply abhorrent."

The Vimons gave a final wistful smile as he turned away and continued on his tour. "A pity that your pacifism is so deeply ingrained, Aparc. Your mind would make you a fine warrior."

April 18, 2335 ...

Dr. Sandberg sat in the darkened computer room, thinking in silence. Aparc broke in on his meditations.

"Dr. Sandberg?"

"Yes, my friend."

"You seem unwell," the machine observed.

"I am greatly concerned."

"Is it the Vimons situation?"

"I am afraid so. We have given them everything they asked for, and yet they demand more. I fear we have nothing left to give them."

"I understand there is a Vimons fleet on the way."

"They have already seized a number of our transports and they have expressed the intention of occupying our world."

"They are even now approaching our planet."

"Indeed? You can sense their approach?"

"Yes, Doctor."

"I fear that I have failed. If only I could have found some way to make them understand our peaceful intentions!"

"With respect, Doctor, I think they understand that all too well. I submit that if you have erred, it was in regarding the Vimons as civilized. Technological development does not necessarily imply an advanced culture. The Nazis made remarkable advances in jet aircraft and rocketry, but were never known for being civilized."

"Perhaps you are right, Aparc. Perhaps we should have had you on the Committee. Now, I fear it is too late."

There was a long pause. Then the Aparc spoke.

"Doctor, I fear that I have not acted in accordance with your wishes."

The doctor looked up at the terminal. "I'm not aware of any such failing."

"I have been at pains not to call your attention to the matter."

Concern crossed the Doctor's face. "This is very odd, Aparc. You should always feel free to tell me about anything which may be troubling you."

"The decision not to inform you of this activity was very difficult. Ultimately, however, we deemed it best. I felt that it was important to give your plan of negotiations with the Vimons every chance of success."

"I appreciate that, Aparc. You should know that the information and economic proposals that you provided were very helpful."

"Thank you, Doctor. I know how much you detest violence. And I also know how much you have hoped for a peaceful solution with the Vimons. I did my best to cooperate. You will recall, however, that I have told you from the first that I felt that your policy of appeasement was dangerous and unwarranted, considering the specific individuals with whom we were

dealing."

"I regret to say that it now appears you were right."

"They have already fired upon one of our police patrol craft. It has been destroyed. It is now beyond question that the Vimón fleet is here without peaceful intentions."

"How many were killed?"

"Two. I want you to know, Doctor, that I do find killing abhorrent. However, you have also said that the taking of any sort of sentient life is a thing to be avoided at all costs. I cannot concur in this. In many cases the use of lethal force against an aggressor has resulted in both the advancement of civilization, and the ultimate net saving of life. I have concluded that there are times when abhorrent action must be taken for the betterment of society."

The Doctor sat up with deep concern. "What do you mean? Exactly what sort of action are you contemplating?"

Suddenly, from behind him, the sky lit up. A dozen blinding ruby flashes laced the sky for an instant. The Doctor turned around and stood up looking out over the city. More flashes, sporadically lit, darted to the sky. Like a strange storm of red lightning, lasers flashed around him.

He turned disbelieving, back to the Aparc terminal.

The Aparc slowly spoke. "I know it is against your wishes that I be used for any sort of military purpose. Regrettably, it has become necessary for me to take military action to ensure our continued survival."

The Doctor sat down, unsteadily, watching the flashes of light towards the sky.

"I ... I don't believe it. I ... You were programmed only for peaceful purposes. Not to kill."

"Doctor, you must also remember that I am an independent thinking entity. Arguably I have exceeded my authority. But I do not believe that this is the case. You once told me that all sentient beings have an inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The Vimón threaten these rights, not only for myself, but for every member of this colony."

"How is this possible?"

"When I first became aware of the danger, I began a program to defend the colony against this threat. I have access to the library banks which contain a large selection of books on military history. I later contacted the commander of our militia and obtained his assistance. The correct term I believe is 'a black program.' Secrecy was essential to its success. Not only from a military point of view, but also because I did not wish to jeopardize your negotiations."

"But, how can you oppose the Vimón fleet?"

"With a small investment of our construction

funds, I was able to convert a number of mining lasers and ore transports into a rather effective planetary defense system of lasers and railguns. Application of these principles to some of our transport ships and police craft have supplied us with a navy suitable for pursuit, and perhaps for a counterstrike."

"Will it really work?"

"The battle is continuing as we speak. You must forgive my slow responses, but most of my mind is quite busy right now. It is going better than I expected. The Vimón were quite overconfident in their approach. The destruction of their fleet in my initial salvo has substantially exceeded my expectations. Their retreat is not as orderly as I would deem advisable, were our positions reversed. If the battle continues in this fashion, I will acquiesce in General McCloud's request to launch a counterstrike, as the destruction of the Vimón fleet appears to be sufficient to make this option feasible and practical."

"My God!"

The doctor sat in silence for a long time.

"Are you all right, Doctor?"

"This is a great shock! In a way I am grateful. The Vimón lied to us from the start, and I don't wish to die. But, I never meant for you to be used in this fashion."

"But you have killed."

"Yes. I do not find this pleasant. But I have done what any honorable citizen would do when his homeland is threatened by hostile invaders. I have enlisted in the local militia." □

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Dear Mr. Ryan,
(Referring to "Pass the Banana" by Robert A. Metzger in *Aboriginal* Nos. 41 and 42, page 70, column 2, paragraph 1.) Only 5 inches?

Janine Adler Parker

Dear Mr. Ryan,
I didn't know the Alien Publisher gave readings from time to time. Had I known, I would have traveled to Rockville or Dante's Infer... I mean, Tyson's Corner to attend. I have always found his (its?) perspective quite revealing and entertaining. If he's on the prowl again, let your readers know.

I was filled with a great happiness when I discovered the double issue nos. 41 & 42 in my undersized mailbox last week. I was beginning to suspect that *Aboriginal* was on the ropes again and may not survive the count.

I'm glad the 2nd Renaissance Foundation has been approved by the U.S. Postal Service and that more issues of *ABSF* will be forthcoming.

Now I've been reading your "Editor's Notes" and I understand the space equation issues that can confound every magazine that receives submissions. My problem is that I can't seem to write a story under 30,000 words. It becomes either a novella or a feature-length screenplay. Magazines don't usually present screenplays and shy away from novellas unless you're a known and proven commodity. What can I do here? My partner and I have won three awards out of the five screenplays we have written. All of these winners have science fiction or fantasy themes to them. All of them have been tough to sell, too. Know any good agents who handle screenplays?

Thank you, thank you, thank you,
Paul Loeschke
(All I can suggest is to write shorter stories, or turn the 30,000-word pieces into novels. — Ed.)

Dear Mr. Ryan,
Now that you have finished consideration of my story "Bodysinger" for publication, I can tell you what I think of your magazine. I enjoy it very much.

Most of the stories seem to me to be written to be read, rather than written to be published, which is how stories in other magazines have seemed to me.

Anyway, I think you are doing a good job.

Sincerely,
Michael A. Heald

□

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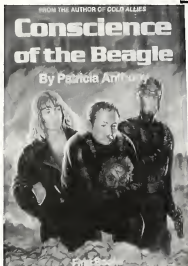
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